

John Prepares the Way

Matthew 3:1-9; Mark 1:1-6; **Luke 3:1-9**

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, 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: 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.” 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 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 3:1-9).

And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey (Mark 1:5-6).

(English Standard Version – ESV)

Background:

- It was customary to begin historical narratives by dating them according to the years of rulers and officials, both in Greco-Roman and Old Testament historiography, and often in introducing prophetic oracles or books (e.g. Isaiah 1:1; 6:1). Thus, Luke shows that John began preaching somewhere between September of AD 27 and October of AD 28 (or, less likely, the next year). Tiberius reigned from AD 14 to 37; Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, was tetrarch from 4 BC to AD 39; Pontius Pilate was in office from AD 26-36.

- Repentance meant turning from sin. The Pharisees themselves are known to have questioned professions of repentance if the supposedly repentant person kept sinning. The Old Testament prophets had sometimes described the obedience one owed God, or God's future blessing of his people, in terms of fruit (a natural image in an agricultural society).

- Isaiah promised a new exodus in which God would again save his people Israel. Luke extends the quote to more of Isaiah 40, possibly to conclude with seeing God's salvation (see Luke 2:30).

- Non-Jews who wished to convert to Judaism were required to immerse themselves in water to remove their impurity as Gentiles; yet, John requires baptism of all who repent, even Jews.

- John's diet is that of the very poor. Although domestic beekeepers were common, John eats only wild honey. Honey was usually procured by smoking the bees out, and then breaking open the honeycomb. Honey was the only sweetener for food and considered the sweetest of tastes.

- Vipers were commonly believed to eat their way out of their mother's womb. John's calling the crowd "brood of vipers" was even nastier than calling them "vipers." Serpents would flee a burning field.

- Jews believed they were saved by virtue of their descent from Abraham; thus, they regarded themselves as God's chosen people. The idea of God raising up people from stones would have sounded to John the Baptist's Jewish hearers more like pagan mythology than reality; however, these words emphasized that God did not need Israel to fulfill his purpose, as in Amos 9:7.

- Jewish literature sometimes used trees to symbolize Israel, and the Old Testament sometimes used trees in parables of judgment against the nations (Isaiah 10:33-34; Ezekiel 31:2-18; Amos 2:9) or Israel (Isaiah 10:18-19; Jeremiah 11:16; Ezekiel 15:6). The wood of a thick tree, like a cedar from Lebanon, would have been used for building, but much of the wood from Palestine would be useful only for small items or for fuel.

- John dressed like the prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8) and other people who lived outside society. The allusion to Elijah here suggests that the end is near (Malachi 4:5-6)

Questions:

- + What is the significance of Luke naming Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanias, who governed during reign of Tiberius Caesar, and also the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas?
- + It says that "the word of God came to John... in the wilderness? What does this mean? Has "the word of God" come to you? If so, how did it come, and how did you respond?
- + John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." What does this mean? In what way or ways are "repentance" and "forgiveness" interrelated and/or interdependent? From what would God have you repent, and what must happen for you to follow through?
- + What did John mean when he said, "prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight?" How can you prepare the way of the Lord? How can you make his paths straight?
- + What did John have against the Pharisees and Sadducees? Who are their equals today? How does John's command to "bear fruit in keeping with repentance" pertain to you? What must happen for you to bear the kind of "fruit" that will please and glorify God?