

# Luke

*Crying in the Wilderness*  
*Luke 3:1-14*

*With Study Questions*

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Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, <sup>4</sup> as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; <sup>6</sup> And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' <sup>7</sup> Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup> And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."<sup>10</sup> So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" <sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." <sup>12</sup> Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." <sup>14</sup> Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:1-14).*

## Introduction

There is a young man who grew up in our church, currently licensed to preach and is in the process of being called and ordained. It could be said that all of his life, God was preparing him. It can also be said that he has been, and continues to be, ministering even before his education and ordination are complete. But the full sense in which his ministry will truly begin is yet before him.

When Paul writes, **“how shall they preach unless they are sent?” (Romans 10:15)**, he assumes a sender. Though all sending has God as a primary cause, God has commissioned churches, elders and councils to take responsibility and send preachers. In this respect, it will be a highly significant event when this ordination takes place.

A very similar outlook can be said of where we are in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke’s orderly account of the narrative of Christ’s ministry (Luke 1:1-4) we have examined the events surrounding the births of John the Baptist and Jesus Himself. Luke also gave us the very unique account of Jesus, at the age of 12, in the temple.

Though Christ had not yet been consecrated in an official capacity, we would pray that the events prior to His baptism, similar to the way we read the Old Testament, would still be ministerial. Yet it would appear that Luke saw the baptistic ministry of John as the fulfillment of the beginning of the gospel ministry. He would write in Acts,

**...you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed (Acts 10:37).**

This may be why Luke, as one focused on an accurate historical account, records the leaders of the day, from which we can fix dates and get a feel for the political and religious currents of the day.

**Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, <sup>2</sup>while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness (Luke 3:1, 2).**

### **Politically and Religiously Wicked**

For the past two thousand year, the entire world (with some brief, unsuccessful exceptions) has fixed its date on the birth of Christ. Prior to that, dates were often determined by who was in charge. We see an example of this in the opening, **“in the fifteenth years of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.”** But beyond that, we also see in these figures (Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas

and Caiphas), as political and religious environment full of darkness and corruption.

Be clear, there is no worse force when it comes to destroying a person's physical well-being than evil political leadership and there is no worse force when it comes to the destruction of the soul than evil religious leadership. Both were in full potency when John was called out of wilderness to begin his ministry. And what was at the heart of this ministry?

**And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins (Luke 3:3).**

### **A Baptism of Repentance**

There is a bit of discussion and disagreement among sound teachers as to whether John's baptism is of a different sort than the New Covenant baptism. We will not dig deeply into that. Clearly, there were baptisms in the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:10). Regardless of the distinction, the message of grace in the Old Covenant is essentially the same message of grace found in the New. And that message of grace contains repentance. In Peter's early New Covenant sermon, he preached, **"Repent, and be baptized" (Acts 2:38).**

Having said that, we should realize that it is not as if our repentance somehow merits, or earns, salvation. Repentance, though necessary on our parts, is itself a gift, a saving grace (WSC, 87). Luke will later write,

**When they heard these things they became silent; and they glorified God, saying, "Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life" (Acts 11:18).**

If one is to have peace with God through the remission, or forgiveness, of their sins, the bare, cold, rite of baptism is insufficient. As we shall see in this passage, the effort of checking all religious boxes is mere religious pomp apart from a regenerated and renewed life.

**...as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. <sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; <sup>6</sup> And all flesh shall see the salvation of God' (Luke 3:4-6).**

## The Crooked Made Straight

Here we have a quotation from Isaiah written some six hundred years prior. Clearly, the fulness of time had arrived (Galatians 4:4). B. C. was about to become A. D. The world would never be the same.

In **“preparing the way of the Lord”** and making **“His paths straight”** he appears to be fulfilling the role that every pastor should seek to fulfill, and that is to have a people prepared to meet their Lord. The language of valleys and mountains and crooked and straight are a way to conveying what the Gospel will accomplish. That which was bent and broken in Adam will be made well by Christ.

The level at which this will be manifested in history is a matter of eschatological conviction. Some think this will merely happen after the Second Coming in the so-called millennium. Others think it should be relegated to a mere poetic/spiritual application and then the eternal state. Others, with whom I find agreement, believe it will take place throughout the course of human history, finding its full consummation in glory.

That **“all flesh shall see the salvation of God”** is the fulfillment of the Great Commission. But first, a cleaning of the house is in order. As Peter wrote,

**For the time *has come* for judgment to begin at the house of God (1 Peter 4:17).**

**Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup>Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. <sup>9</sup>And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7-9).**

## No Cultural Baptisms

John has, no doubt, drawn a crowd. And everyone in that crowd wants to take part in the religion. ‘Oh, everyone’s getting baptized! Count me in.’

Apparently, John was not warm to the idea of cultural baptisms. These three verses are quite full of lessons, addressing many of their errors and errors which still abide. We will lightly touch them:

- First, that baptism is redemptive apart from repentance is firmly refuted.
- Second, that a person can have Jesus as Savior without having Him also as Lord is firmly refuted.
- Third, that the descendants of Abraham are still God's chosen people has been arm-wrestled to the bar.
- Fourth, clearly something highly significant is at hand with the ax laid at the root of the trees (this culminates with the destruction of the temple and the fall of Jerusalem, which Jesus will preach on later in chapter 21).
- Fifth, that inclusion in the covenant means you're actually regenerate/truly saved since being fruitless branch means being thrown into the fire.

For our current purpose, this message is to the covenant people of God, what today we would call the church. It is very possible for a building to have a cross, for a person to wear and robe and for the elements of the sacraments to exist in communities which are governed by a **"brood of vipers,"** a bunch of venomous baby snakes.

It is one thing to live in a society that is sexually sinful and confused. It should, but is not, shocking to live in a society that kills unborn babies. It should, but is not, shocking to live in a society that thinks it is the job of the government to clothe, feed, educate us and keep us healthy, etc., etc.

But it is quite another thing to see clergymen and clergywomen in their multi-colored robes teaching such things in their synagogues of Satan. I don't mean to sound overly harsh or mean-spirited. But John's convictions were strong and they would eventually cost him his life.

It was not an act of malevolence for John to say such things, to exclude the brood, if you will. It wasn't mere name-calling. It was a warning and a great act of love. How many of that brood responded well, it is hard to say. But clearly, he had the ears of many.

**So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?" <sup>11</sup> He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." <sup>12</sup> Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"<sup>13</sup> And he said to**

them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you." <sup>14</sup> Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages" (Luke 3:10-14).

### Show Me Your Faith by Faithfulness

Simply put, if you have truly repented (which at its root mean to change one's mind-metanoias), "**bear fruit worthy** (corresponding with) **repentance.**" Show me you've changed your mind by what you do. There are three groups represented, but it is hardly an exhaustive list. He speaks to people in general, then to tax collectors, then to soldiers (probably not, at this point, Roman soldiers but likely the forces of Herod stationed in Peraea, or Jewish auxiliaries, since this was largely a Jewish audience).

If I can make this a bit more contemporary, since these are the covenant people of God, there is a call to show your faith by your faithfulness. You are a baptized member in good standing. That is good. You go to the Lord's Table regularly. That is good. You seldom miss church. Good. But what does your life look like?

Are you doing anything for people lacking clothing or food? Let us not lose the impact of what comes to the fore on Judgment Day. Though we rightfully denounce the false teaching that we are saved by any of our works, it is our works of feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, accommodating the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the sick and imprisoned that Jesus mentions (Matthew 25:35, 36). Our present abundance "**should supply**" (2 **Corinthians 8:14**) the need of others.

It may be a bit striking that John does not call the tax collectors or soldiers to find new jobs, since their professions were considered questionable. Instead, he calls them to do their jobs honorably. Collect what you're supposed to collect and don't shake people down for money or intimidate or falsely accuse people.

This may sound simple, but it is likely that many of them had created situations where being honest would now put them in a difficult situation with others who relied on them to be dishonest. The bottom line in this portion of the Scriptures is that if we are truly to be the covenant people of God, that is, the people of His promise, we need to walk accordingly.

## Questions for Study

1. Jesus was consecrated for His ministry at His baptism. Does this mean He didn't minister at all until then? Explain (pages 2-3).
2. Describe the political and religious environment in which John and Jesus began their ministries. (pages 3, 4).
3. Does water baptism save? Why? Why not? What message does John include with baptisms (page 4)?
4. What effect with the gospel have according to Luke 3:4-6 (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss some of the popular, common errors addressed in Luke 3:7-9 (pages 5, 6).
6. How does one determine if religious leaders are a brood of vipers (page 6)?
7. What should true repentance produce? Can you give examples of that in your own life (page 7)?