

A SAVIOR *for* ALL PEOPLE

A Study of Luke's Gospel



LESSON 3 Luke 3:1-58

Information for Teacher

This week's lesson covers a little bit less than the previous two weeks, so you can take a welcome breather and slow down as you move through the text and the lesson.

Note that we have fast-forwarded about eighteen years since the end of chapter two. John the Baptist and Jesus are now grown and beginning their ministries.

Opening Discussion

- *What is the purpose of an "opening act" at a concert? Tell the class about the best or worst opening act you've ever seen.*

Introduction

Luke's Gospel gives us two full chapters of detail about the days of Jesus' infancy (and one story about his pre-teen years). But Luke needs to get us into the thick of things quickly now, so at the onset of chapter three, we find that Luke's story has progressed eighteen years since Jesus was spending time with the rabbis at the temple, and John the Baptist is about to emerge from his time in the wilderness (see 1:80).

Compared to Jesus, John the Baptist receives little time and attention in the Gospels. But in today's reading, he is the main focus, teaching and baptizing people to prepare them for the emergence of the Messiah.

The Biblical Text

Luke 3:1-2a (The Historical Setting)

- Luke begins by giving us several **historical details** about when this story takes place:
 - Fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar
 - Pontius Pilate is governor of Judaea
 - Herod is tetrarch of Galilee
 - Philip is tetrarch of Iturea
 - Lysanias is tetrarch of Abilene
 - Annas/Caiaphas is high priest

- By giving these details, Luke is doing the following:
 - Giving simple **historical context**
 - Naming some **names that would have evoked fear** in first century Jews/Christians (i.e., he is reminding his later readers that the emergence of John the Baptist and Jesus happened during the reign of scary, unfriendly rulers). All who heard predictions of a Messiah would have hoped and expected that the Messiah would **overthrow** these oppressive rulers.
 - Reminding readers that the gospel is a **historical story that really happened**.

Luke 3:2b-14 (Ministry of John the Baptist)

- The story begins with “the word of God came to John son of Zechariah...” (3:2). This is a common way of **introducing a prophet**. Jeremiah and Ezekiel are both introduced by this kind of language.
- Luke tells us that John the Baptist is preaching a **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**.
 - This was normally reserved for **Gentiles** who wanted to convert to Judaism.
 - So asking Jews to undergo baptism was a **biting indictment** of their sorry state of obedience. Jews were not used to being asked to undergo baptism.
- Next, Luke quotes a **passage from Isaiah** and applies it to John (Luke 3:4-6).
 - John is “a voice calling in the wilderness.”
 - We sometimes think this is a metaphor for someone preaching/speaking to people who aren’t listening, i.e., **preaching in vain**.
 - But this is just referring to John’s background (growing up in the wilderness) and the area in which he is preaching. In fact, many people are listening attentively to John.
 - John is **preparing the way for the Lord**.
 - When the Messiah emerges , the following will happen:
 - The valleys will be filled in.
 - The mountains and hills will be made low.
 - Crooked ways become straight.
 - Rough ways become smooth.
 - Again, **fortunes will be reversed** (a theme in Luke).
 - **All people** will see God’s salvation (another theme from Luke).
- John now turns his attention to rebuking the crowd (Luke 3:7-9). Remember, the very fact that he was preaching baptism to Jews was an **insult** to them and a testament to their distance from God.
 - John tells them that they need to **repent**, and that they need to **produce fruit** (i.e., yield results in their lives) consistent with that repentance.
 - The Jews apparently used their **genetic ties to Abraham** as a defense, but John will have none of that. Genetics mean nothing.
 - Those who do not produce fruit will be **cut off by God**.
- After rebuking and warning the crowd, John answers questions about what they should do next (Luke 3:10-14).
 - John gives some **practical tips** that all have to do with economics:
 - People ought to **share their possessions** (v. 11).

- Tax collectors should not **over-collect** and **take advantage** of people monetarily (v. 13).
- Soldiers cannot use their power to **extort** money – especially **accusing people** falsely in order to receive a bribe (v. 14).

- *John believes that repentance is not just backward-looking, but forward-looking. Repentance should make a difference in how we think and act from now on. In what ways should repentance make a difference for us?*
- *John believes that our discipleship should have economic, here-and-now consequences. What are those for us?*

Luke 3:15-20 (John Predicts Jesus)

- People understandably wondered if John the Baptist was the **Messiah**.
- John will not let himself be **lumped in with Jesus**. John is unworthy even to perform the lowly task of untying Jesus' sandals.
- John paints a **scary picture** of a Messiah with a winnowing fork who is coming to clean house.
- John answers the crowd's questions by comparing the baptisms: John baptizes with **water**, while Jesus will baptize with the **Holy Spirit and fire**.
- John's and Jesus' baptisms will both be water baptism. The **difference is the presence of the Holy Spirit**, which John symbolizes with fire.
- Luke briefly tells us that John's career ends when he confronts one of the Jewish rulers about his marriage to his sister-in-law.

- *What does John the Baptist think of himself in relation to Jesus?*
- *How do you think of yourself in relation to Jesus?*
- *What is the difference between wheat and chaff? (Think back to what John has said earlier.)*

Luke 3:21-22 (Baptism of Jesus)

- Jesus' emergence onto the scene is not filled with **fanfare**. People are being baptized and he comes to do the same.
- While Jesus is praying at his baptism, three things happen:
 - The **skies open** (the Greek word for "sky" and "heaven" is the same).
 - The **Holy Spirit descends** on him like a dove.
 - A **voice comes from the skies** (presumably God), claiming Jesus as his son and affirming his pleasure with his son.
 - Some have said this is where Jesus first actually becomes divine. This theory is called *adoptionism*.
 - But mainstream Christianity has always believed Jesus was divine from the moment of conception.

- *What purpose could Jesus' baptism have served?*
- *What purpose could this public affirmation of Jesus by God have served?*

Application

- *Respond to this statement: “Christian living is more than repentance, but it is certainly not less.”*
- *How is John’s message of pruning “good news”?*
- *What makes repentance more than a ritual?*
- *What should repentance lead to? What has it led to in your life?*
- *Have you ever put your trust in your family’s religious heritage? (I.e., I come from a Christian family, so I’m doing fine.)*

Next Week’s Text

Luke 4:1-30