

St Luke 3:1-18

The One Who Is Mightier Than John Is Coming

We know that Dr. Luke, a Gentile, is the historian of the New Covenant and that in his history of Jesus and His church, he penned more words than all the other writers of the New Testament. He began his Gospel describing his task as carefully recording eyewitness testimony, researching other gospel-narratives, and compiling an “orderly account” of the history of Jesus’ ministry, death, and resurrection so that we, his readers, would be certain about these things we have been taught (1:1-4). He further recorded the events of the earliest days of the church in the Book of Acts, describing how the Holy Spirit was poured out, as Jesus had promised, and caused the church, the body of Jesus, to flourish to the ends of the earth.

So it makes sense that Luke begins **chap. 3**, where Jesus’ ministry-proper actually begins, with the most detailed account of the political structures of Palestine as the new King arrived to take up His ministry on earth. This is the world, the time and place, Jesus entered from Heaven. After the angelic revelations, the Spirit-endowed prophecy upon those faithful to God and the scene of 12 year-old Jesus learning in the temple, Luke now carefully dates the moment at which Jesus appears on the scene: the fifteenth year of Tiberius’ reign as Caesar of Rome (v. 1; ca. AD 29, Tiberius became emperor in AD 14). Pontius Pilate had been appointed prefect or governor of Judea, one of 4 territories of the Herodian Dynasty, now ruled directly by Rome, and he held that position for 10 years (AD 26-36).

At the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, his kingdom was divided into 4 territories each being ruled by one of his sons. Herod Antipas was a tetrarch (meaning a ruler over one-fourth of the territories) ruling Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to AD 39 and his brother Herod Phillip II was tetrarch of Batanea, the region northeast of the Jordan River, described here as Ituraea and Trachonitis, from 4 BC to AD 34.

Finally, Lysanias ruled over an area near Damascus, here located in Abilene, a large plain in Syria, and he reigned over that region until AD 37, when Herod Agrippa I became ruler.

[As an aside, in 1860 a stage coach stop in Kansas was named Abilene, after this passage in Luke 3:1, meaning “city of the plains.” Later in 1881, our city was established by cattlemen as a stock shipping point on the Texas and Pacific Railway (the original endpoint of the Chisholm Trail), and was named Abilene after Abilene, Kansas.]

Luke also mentions the two high priests of the day, Annas and Caiaphas in v. 2. Annas was an earlier high priest (AD 6-15), who continued to have great influence into Jesus’ earthly

ministry and was father-in-law of the current high priest, Caiaphas (cf. **John 18:13**; AD 18-36) and both retained much of the power and prestige of the high-priestly order in the years to come.

Why is this historical detail necessary? We know that both John and Jesus will have dealings with these leaders throughout the Gospel. John will confront and later be arrested and executed by one of these tetrarchs, Herod Antipas (**Luke 3:19-20; Matt. 14:3-11**), and Jesus will be brought before four of these rulers, Pilate (**Luke 23**), Herod Antipas (**Luke 23:7f.**), and both Annas and Caiaphas (**John 18:13-14, 24, 28; Matt. 26:3, 57**) who will together hand Him over to be executed like a common criminal. So it is important that Luke sets the political climate before us which will play such a central role in opposition to the coming of God's kingdom to earth.

But it further reminds us of the historical precision with which Luke is concerned to carefully record for the church. Our faith is not of the kind in which historical details are irrelevant. Ours is not a faith in which the teachings of Jesus are all we can squeeze out of the life of Jesus as the only important remnants of the ancient story. Some in the history of Christianity have wanted to reduce the Christian faith to merely a life-style to be lived on the basis of the moral teachings of Jesus. We are told that what is important is not what Jesus did but what He taught and if we will simply live by those teachings then we will have a better life. But that misunderstanding reduces Christianity to sentimentality and mere moralism and completely misses the whole point of the Bible namely that what is most important about Jesus' life is that He came and did what we couldn't do for ourselves. And those historical facts of Jesus' virgin birth, His miracles of healing the sick and raising the dead, His forgiving sins, and His death, burial, and bodily resurrection from the dead are not mythological husks which need to be discarded but are the very doctrines which testify to the uniqueness of Christ as the one and only way to God the Father.

Further, the accuracy of these historical details are confirmed by the contemporary historians of Luke's day who are writing outside of the Bible giving validity to Luke's biography of Jesus. It is not that our faith is dependent on outside sources to confirm the validity of the Word of God. There is no higher authority than God's Word and therefore there is no other source to which the Word of God must depend upon for its trustworthiness to confirm our faith. However, it does add a confirming basis of trustworthiness as when other witnesses confirm the testimony of a key witness in a major trial. Those lesser witnesses may not be giving the key testimony in the trial but they may be confirming for the jury the trustworthiness of the major witness upon whom the defense may rest its case.

So, just who is John the Baptizer and what is his significance here in the Gospel? Luke will give us more detail about John later in the Gospel which is of great importance here. Let's look first at **Luke 16:16**. Historically, Jesus dates the Law and Prophets up through John, meaning that John served as the culmination of the Old Covenant. With the inauguration of Jesus, the New Covenant began. Jesus says that "since then," the time after John, came "the good news of the kingdom of God," which is now preached by Messiah Jesus. This verse separates two large periods of the history of redemption: the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The Old Covenant is characterized by the Law and Prophets, to which John belongs, and the New Covenant is characterized by the Gospel, to which Jesus belongs.

A second passage which is very helpful is found in **Luke 7:28**. Of all the prophets of the Old Covenant, there was none greater than John. All the Old Testament prophets, which included John, looked forward to the coming of the messianic kingdom of God. But none greater than John appeared before him because John alone was the direct forerunner of Messiah. His ministry alone is unique because he was the red carpet God laid out to welcome Jesus into the world. But since John belonged to the Old Covenant, Jesus goes on to say that one who belongs to the kingdom of the New Covenant of Jesus is infinitely greater than John because they are directly related to Jesus by faith alone.

Both of these verses together set up the greatness of Jesus in comparison both to John and the Old Covenant. What God is doing in Jesus is both something in continuity to the past, as promise is related to fulfillment, but also something very different in that the fulfillment far surpasses the glory of the Old Covenant which now passes away in light of the raising up of the Son of God.

Once the historical details have been noted, Luke then announces the call of John to now go forward as a prophet. Like the prophets before him, John's prophetic call is carefully dated when the Word of the LORD God of Israel came upon him (**v. 2; cf. Isa. 6:1; Jer. 1:2; Ezek. 1:1-3**). The emphasis of the Word of God coming upon John places him directly within the prophetic tradition of Old Testament prophets. John, like many of the prophets of old, had been set aside by God from his birth (**cf. Jer. 1:5**) but now it is time for him to come forward to announce the fulfillment of the long-anticipated promise of God.

Luke identifies John with the wilderness primarily because it is out of the wilderness that God promises to bring about a resurrection of His people. Hosea the prophet said:

Hosea 2:14-15 ¹⁴ "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ And there I will give her her vineyards and

make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

The prophet Ezekiel pictures this renewal as a resurrection from within a valley of dry bones (cf. Ezek. 37). But it is Isaiah who speaks directly of a voice of comfort crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the coming of the LORD God (cf. 3:4; Isa. 40:1-5). Just as Yahweh called His people out of Egypt and into the wilderness to remake them into a “kingdom of priests” and a “holy nation” (cf. Ex. 19:6), so He now sends John to His people once again to call them to repentance in preparation for the coming of the LORD God (v. 3). Further, it was in the wilderness that God delivered His Law to the people which will guide them in righteousness before Him. And so John is sent by God to not only call His people to repentance but to bear the fruits of repentance in following God’s commandments (vv. 7-8).

The location of John’s preaching and baptism is very important in redemptive history. It was at the Jordan River that Israel crossed over to enter into the Promised Land of God. It is as if God is calling them back to that River to start again, which is the idea of repentance. It is a turning from faithlessness and rebellion to God to trusting Him and walking in His ways. John’s baptism was a sign to those who had repented that God had cleansed them from their sins, forgiving them for all their unrighteousness.

What is amazing about this scene is that the cleansing has nothing to do with the sacrificial system which was given through Moses. There is no shedding of blood, no sacrificial lamb being offered, no scapegoat into the wilderness. This is something new and different being announced because it is preparation for God’s Lamb who is coming to be offered up for their sins. John makes this connection in our passage in v. 16 between his baptism of preparation and Jesus’ baptism of the Holy Spirit and of fire. This is the essence of what John is proclaiming – the good news of the One who is coming! While John is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins – the true way in which that forgiveness is coming is left to be unfolded when Jesus appears.

At this point, Isaiah describes John as preparing the way for “all flesh to see the salvation of God” (v. 6). Through the preaching of John, God is preparing His people for this salvation. The way being prepared could be understood in two ways here – first, nothing will stand in the way or hinder this salvation from coming, but second, John’s preaching will prepare the people themselves by making them “straight” and smoothing the “rough places” by calling them to repentance before the LORD.

John’s preaching, like the law and prophets before him, will be hard for the people to hear. Right out of the gate he addresses the people, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee

from the wrath to come?" A "brood of vipers" or a "family of snakes" would be an incredible danger to people living in the wilderness. Those who live in rebellion to God are like a family of snakes to others (cf. vv. 11-14). Evidently, some were coming to John to be baptized for forgiveness of sins and then returning to their old way of life not realizing what true repentance looked like. Others were simply claiming their Israeli birthright as a talisman to protect them from the wrath of God to come (v. 8), showing no signs of true repentance. John emphasizes that neither his baptism nor their birthright are to be treated as a substitute for true repentance. Why?

Because the axe of God's wrath are already pressed against the root of the tree of Jewish lives (v. 9). The wrath is already at the door, it is about to knock the doors of their lives down and come in and destroy everyone inside. And every tree which does not bear the fruit of repentance of God will be cut down and thrown into the fire. John pictures a vinedresser who removes the dead branches of a vine, which produce no fruit, as being cut and thrown into a fire to be burned. This is what God will do to everyone who chooses not to follow His commandments. Everyone who does not repent of their ways will be cut off and burned up.

How will this happen? Where is this wrath of God coming from? It will come from the One who is mightier than John, who is not worthy to fulfill the smallest act of a slave – to untie the sandal of the Messiah. He will baptize, not simply with water, but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John's statement simply leaves us breathless! The prophets spoke of the Messiah as being anointed with the Holy Spirit, but none of the prophets spoke of Messiah as dispensing or giving the Holy Spirit upon God's people.

What John is ultimately declaring is that what these brood of vipers can't do, Messiah is coming to do! He will produce the works and pour out His Holy Spirit upon those He will gather into His barn and He will burn with fire those He doesn't baptize with the Holy Spirit with unquenchable fire (v. 17). What John and the prophets, before him, were preparing the people for is coming: the true Christ, the Messiah of God who will come to bring about the salvation of God. All who realize that neither their dead works nor their birthright will save them must look to this One who is coming, Jesus, to be saved. He is mightier than John because when He comes He will not be preparing the world for someone greater still! No! He will be the One the world has been waiting for – He will bring to pass – He will accomplish all that God had promised – He will make all flesh see the salvation of God. It is as if John repeats the words of the Psalmist in preparation of the coming of Jesus:

Psalm 2:11 - 3:1 ¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. ¹² Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. **Amen! -SDG-**