

Luke 3:1 – 20

^{3:1} Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, ² in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. ³ And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵ Every ravine will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; ⁶ and all flesh will see the salvation of God.’ ⁷ So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, ‘You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’ ⁸ Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. ⁹ Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.’ ¹⁰ And the crowds were questioning him, saying, ‘Then what shall we do?’ ¹¹ And he would answer and say to them, ‘The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.’ ¹² And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ ¹³ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.’ ¹⁴ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, ‘And what about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.’ ¹⁵ Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶ John answered and said to them all, ‘As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to thoroughly clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ ¹⁸ So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people. ¹⁹ But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, ²⁰ Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.

Historical and Cultural Background

- *The Roman Empire* was occupying Israel. The Jews hated them. They longed for God to usher in ‘the reign of God’ and rescue them from the rule of the Gentiles. The ‘roll out the red carpet’ quote from Isaiah 40 (Lk.3:4 – 6) is one of many biblical passages of that hope.
- *Herod, Philip, and Lysanias* (3:1) were three out of the four sons of the Herod the Great (descended from Esau, and non-Jewish). He had ruled as ‘king’ of the Judean area by permission of the Romans until his death. When he died, he divided his kingdom between his four sons. Hence, the term ‘tetrarch.’ Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor with true power.
- *John the Baptist* (3:2) was the first prophet in Israel for about three hundred years. He was a preacher, and a cousin of Jesus. He had publicly criticized Herod the tetrarch for committing adultery with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip (3:1).
- *Baptism* was based on the Old Testament pattern of God forming people into new life through water, like Israel coming through the Red Sea. It’s a symbol of becoming or joining God’s true humanity. Notice:

Adam & Eve	Noah & family	Israel
<p>Gen.1:2 the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters... 27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (God then placed humanity in a garden land.)</p>	<p>Gen.7:24 The water prevailed upon the earth one hundred and fifty days. 8:1 But God remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark; and God caused a wind to pass over the earth, and the water subsided. (Noah then planted a garden.)</p>	<p>Ex.14:29 But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. 30 Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians... (Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years until God placed them in the garden land.)</p>

- *Jewish tax collectors* (3:12) were traitors to the Jewish people. They made money by collecting more from their own people than the Romans commanded them to tax.
- *Roman soldiers* (3:14) normally took money by force from the Jewish community because their wages were low.

Questions

1. Why do you think Luke is interested in situating John the Baptist and Jesus in history with the political figures that were around?
 - a. Rooting events in history means that they really happened. They can also be investigated historically.
 - b. John the Baptist had a specific message for Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, because of his many abuses of power. Notice: 'wicked things' in v.19. Herod's affair with Herodias was only one issue that John the Baptist called out. Presumably John's message of repentance, since he spoke so often about money and injustice, enraged Herod.
 - c. Because Jesus will also have a specific message for Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor.
2. What is John the Baptist like? What if you had met him?
 - a. He is very focused, shown by the way he draws on Isaiah 40:3 – 5, which is about God returning to Zion and restoring Israel from exile.
 - b. He is an uncompromising straight shooter.
 - c. He is not intimidated by power or lineage.
3. Why does John baptize people? What does baptism mean?
 - a. He's saying that people needed to re-live Israel's experience going through the Red Sea. God is re-forming and reforming Israel.
 - b. What does it mean to John to be Jewish? Jewishness in Scripture is not actually an ethnicity. It is a faith. God always welcomed non-Jews into the community through their conversion and faith. Judah brought Tamar the Canaanite into the family of faith. Joseph brought Asenath the Egyptian into the family of faith. A whole bunch of Egyptians joined Israel when they left Egypt. Caleb, one of the lieutenants of Moses, was a Canaanite ethnically but was Jewish by faith. Rahab and her household defected from Jericho and joined Israel. Etc.
4. Why does John quote from Isaiah?
 - a. God is turning the world upside down: That is what this language of mountains flattened and valleys raised up meant. We've already seen the theme of reversal in Luke through the words of Mary of Nazareth and Zacharias.
 - b. All flesh will see: God will do something that everyone will see. Notice that John does not privilege Jews for being biologically related to Abraham. Nor does he turn away Roman soldiers.
 - c. The salvation of God: The second time that the word 'soterion' is used in Luke's story; the first time was by Simeon in the Temple when he saw the infant Jesus (Lk.2:30). So people are going to 'see' Jesus in a way that is similar to Simeon. This is why 'sight' is the main point when Jesus preaches in the Nazareth synagogue, why all eyes are upon him, but they don't 'see' truly.
5. Why do you think John the Baptist calls for people to change the ways they handle money?
 - a. The average person needs to share their things and care for the poor. Notice this is not 'tithe 10% to your local church.' Rather, it's 'give up to 50% away directly to the poor and those in need.' The second and third responses refer to the political situation.
 - b. Jewish tax collectors worked for the Roman government by collecting taxes from their fellow Jews. John tells them to effectively not make any money; do not personally benefit from the social injustice, even if you have to absorb it in your own paycheck and lifestyle. This is different from how we typically handle social injustice. We say to people to get out of certain careers. And that may be appropriate at times as well. But John perceives that the political reality is not just going to change overnight, so the tax collectors are not going to disappear. But they can lighten the burden in concern for their fellow Jews and in protest to the Roman occupation. They would have had to re-enter Israel and be supported by the community for as long as they collected taxes.
 - c. The Roman soldiers would have felt similarly. They were probably instructed by their superiors to extort the Jews and just take things. But John the Baptist tells them to bow to a higher authority – God – and disobey their commanding officers if the officer told them to extort money.
 - d. Later, while John is doing all this, Jesus slips away into the wilderness to confront Satan, and win a victory that no one else could. Satan has some kind of influence over the nations (Lk.4:5 – 8). Jesus was going to challenge that influence in some deep way. But we see the precursors of God's kingdom here in John's preaching. Jesus would not be a military messiah, and the kingdom of God is not a nation-state. But Jesus does confront the political powers, and the kingdom does impact political and economic injustice.

- e. There are stirrings of a new kingdom community being born. John refers to ‘all flesh’ in the Isaiah quote. He welcomes all people to God through repentance and baptism. He calls for people to care for others in the midst of an unjust occupation.
 - f. Application: How has God led you, or how can you imagine God leading you, based on this passage, to handle your money and lifestyle? To simply care more for the poor around you? Or is there a way that He is calling you to address some injustice that you participate in? Undo some of the political and economic effects of imperialism and colonialism, like property rights trumping human rights, or racism in various forms, or the neo-liberal idea that corporations should run free in the developing world? What would it mean to absorb injustice in your own paycheck and lifestyle?
6. Is ‘fire’ a positive or negative experience?
- a. Negative in v.9 and 17 because fire is destroying wood
 - b. Positive in connection with the Holy Spirit in v.16 because the Spirit purifies us from within.
 - c. John uses ‘fire’ like the Old Testament writers did. God is a purifying fire. If you welcome God purifying you, you experience Him as a blessing. If you don’t, you experience Him as torment.
 - d. ‘Fire and darkness’ come from Israel’s refusal to come up Mount Sinai to meet with God. This is what Moses said: ‘You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain burned with fire to the very heart of the heavens: darkness, cloud and thick gloom...’ I was standing between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; *for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain* (Dt.4:11; 5:5). Fire and darkness are literary motifs related to Israel’s failure at Mount Sinai. They said, ‘No’ to God’s invitation to come higher up and further in, and *remained on the outside of God* instead. (For more information on these New Testament passages on fire and darkness, as well as the Old Testament’s treatment of these motifs, see my paper, *Hell as Fire and Darkness: Remembrance of Sinai as Covenant Rejection in Matthew’s Gospel* found here: <http://nagasawafamily.org/matthew-theme-fire-and-darkness-as-hell.pdf>)
 - e. Throughout Scripture, fire is symbolic of God’s refining presence: God appeared as a fire in the burning thorn bush (Ex.3:2; Acts 7:30) and as fire on Mount Sinai inviting Israel higher up and further in (Ex.19:13; Dt.5:5). Malachi said, ‘He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver’ (Mal.3:2 – 3). Jesus will refine and transform: ‘He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’ (Mt.3:11). And at Pentecost, which was the anniversary of Israel at Mount Sinai receiving the Law, Jesus sent his Spirit to do just that, and turned each of his disciples into a mini-Mount Sinai complete with fire on top: ‘And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.’ (Acts 2:3).
 - f. Paul said God’s refining fire will test the quality of his ministry: ‘Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.’ (1 Cor.3:12 – 15).
 - g. See also Isaiah’s use of fire in Isaiah 6, when God touches a burning coal to his lips to cleanse his speech, and Isa.29:6; 30:27 – 30; Ezk.22:17 – 22; Ps.29:7; 50:3; Neh.9:12; Heb.12:29.
 - h. So whether you receive God’s purification as joy or torment depends on you. Do you want to be purified? Do you want to see God’s salvation as salvation from your sin? Or will you resist God, identify with your sin, and therefore feel like God is destroying *you* per se? Even hell is the love of God, the purifying fire of God, experienced by people who don’t want to be purified! See <http://nagasawafamily.org/hell-as-the-love-of-god.pdf> for more on that.
 - i. Application: Think about the way you feel like God is reshaping your view of people and money. Praise God for that and sing a worship song. Read Psalm 112. Even if you find it hard at the moment, like if it causes conflict in you or conflict between you and your parents/social group, cultivate His desires, and ask God to help you want more of His character.