

The Forerunner, John the Baptist

(Luke 3:1-6)

As Jesus preaches throughout Luke's gospel, he will repeatedly call his disciples to follow him down a road that is hard and costly. This challenge to commit to a radical lifestyle begins with the preaching of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist is one of the most important people in history. Indeed, Jesus will later say in **Luke 7:28**, that of all those born of women no one is greater than John. Abraham, Moses, King David, and Elijah—John is greater than all of them, because he pointed most clearly to the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Luke tells us in **verse 2** that “the word of God came to John”. This is very important. After four hundred years of virtual silence, God is speaking to his people again (Hebrews 1:1-2).

John was the man who launched the most pivotal point of history—the coming of Christ. Some may dispute that the coming of Christ is the most significant event in history, but Scripture proclaims that God will someday reveal the fact to all. Luke points to the fact by dating the coming of Christ with significant events and historical

rulers. The very first event was God's call to John. Therefore, the beginning of the greatest period in all history began with the call of John, the Lord's forerunner. Let me make note of several facts.

One, Tiberius Caesar was in the 15th year of his reign when God called John. Tiberius was the second Roman Emperor, beginning in 14 A.D. Therefore, the emergence of John took place between 28-29 A.D. Two, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He was both the civil ruler and a military commander. Pilate held office from 26-36 A.D. Three, Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Tetrarch simply means a ruler over a fourth part. He inherited his territory at his father's death and ruled from 4 B.C. to 39 A.D. Four, Philip was a tetrarch as was Lysanius. Five, Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. This statement throws a revealing light upon the high priesthood of Jesus' day. It shows just how political and corrupt the high priesthood had become. There was never to be more than one High Priest at any given time. The priesthood was supposed to be for life and was supposed to be hereditary. But with the coming of

Roman rule, the High Priest became a political power base. Rome used the position to secure power over Jewish life. They offered and gave the position to men who were cooperative and willing to let the people follow Roman rule. For example, between 37 B.C. and 26 A.D., there were twenty-eight different men who were installed and removed as High Priest.

The point Luke is making is just this: the High Priest's office had become corrupted, and religious positions had become politically motivated. Annas, who served as High Priest between 7-14 A.D., was still the power behind the throne. Caiaphas was officially the High Priest in Rome's eyes, but Annas was still the one to whom most Jewish leaders looked. This is actually seen during the trials of Jesus. Jesus was first taken to Annas, despite the fact that he was not the official High Priest (John 18:13).

John the Baptist was a man called out of the wilderness. I will make note of **three** points. **First**, God's call came to John in the wilderness, in an obscure place. The place where John was reared was so slightly populated that it was known as a wilderness. The area consisted of only

six small towns or villages scattered far apart. God found John in the most obscure part. One quick thought. The place where a person is does not matter; a person's heart is what matters. If a person's heart is right toward God, God will call him no matter how obscure his residence is. The Word of God is not limited; it reaches even to the wilderness.

My **second** point is that God's call was a very personal matter. John never revealed how God spoke to him. Did God call him through a vision, through the appearance of an angel, through an audible voice, or through an inner sense? We do not know. John keeps the matter in his heart; it was just too intimate, too meaningful an experience. And his heart was genuine and pure. He was not willing to lower his intimacy with God by talking about it, that is, by acting super-spiritual.

My **third** point is that God's call was for John to serve God rather than to serve institutional religion. John was somewhere around 30 years of age, the age when he was to become a full-fledged priest by descent. Remember,

his father Zechariah was a priest, and the priesthood was by descent. He was supposed to have been in training for some five years, and when he reached age thirty, he was to begin serving in the temple. But God's call was to a different ministry, a ministry that fit into God's plans much more than institutional religion.

One quick thought. It is God who calls a man, not institutional religion. A man's first loyalty is to God, not to institutional religion. A **second** quick thought. God moves outside institutional religion as well as within institutional religion. For example, Simeon, whom we've talked about before, was probably a priest within the temple, and Anna was a prophetess within the temple. Let me make note of **two** things. **First**, institutional religionists often frown and oppose those ministering outside the institution. They feel threatened, as though the outside minister is against them. Sometimes they are right; the outsider is sometimes against them. But if the outside minister is truly ministering, there should be support and encouragement. However, too often cooperation is not given. The intuitional religionist too

often fears the loss of authority, position, and security; therefore, he opposed the outside minister. Such motives are corrupt and need to be corrected. Ministers, both within and outside institutional religion, need to be about God's call and business. They should not be wasting time by struggling against each other. Time is too short, and God's call comes to men both within and outside institutional religion. Each needs to support the other in God's calling.

The **second** thing I want to make note of is that a man must do and serve God as God calls and wills. Which is pointed out for us in **John 15:16**, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

John was a man who preached repentance and forgiveness of sins. Note the exact wording: "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3). This simply means that if a man wished to be forgiven his sins, he repented. He turned from his sins, and changed his life; then he was baptized. Baptism was the sign to his

neighbors and the world that he was changing his life (repenting) because he wanted God to forgive his sins. It was baptism that proclaimed to everyone that the man wanted forgiveness and was turning from his sin.

Baptism was the act, the sign, that said to the world that the man was thereafter going to live a changed life, so that God would forgive his sins.

Two simple facts are being stated. **First**, forgiveness of sins is conditional. A man must repent to be forgiven, and if he truly repents, he is baptized. Baptism is part of the act of repentance! **Second**, baptism is the immediate witness and sign that a man is repenting and changing his life. If a man is truly sincere in seeking forgiveness, he is baptized and changes his life, turning away from sin and turning to God. Which is what we can read in **Acts 2:38**, “Peter replied, ‘Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’”

John was a man who cried out apocalyptically: “Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.” John

warned the people and he quoted **Isaiah 40:3-5** as his authority. He took the points Isaiah had made and proclaimed them to the people. **#1**, Prepare, for the humbled shall be exalted. Every valley (the humble believers of the earth) shall be filled, that is, received, enriched, raised up, and exalted. **#2**, Prepare, for the proud shall be made low. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. The self-sufficient and the self-confident, the prideful and the boastful, the conceited and the arrogant shall lose everything and be brought low. **#3**, Prepare, for the crooked roads shall be straightened. All the crooked sinners of the earth will be bent out of shape—all who repent shall be made straight by the Messiah. **#4**, Prepare, for the rough ways shall be made smooth. The ways of hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, guilt, shame, sin, death, false religion, and empty worship—all shall be made smooth. When the way is prepared, the Savior will appear.

John's preaching aroused thousands. It woke them and stirred them to prepare and to look for the Messiah.

Apparently, it was the multitude who listened to John who eventually became the followers of Christ. It was also the same multitude who created the excitement needed to spread the news of the Messiah's coming. Let me close with this from the book of **Amos 4:12**, "Prepare to meet your God, O Israel."

What are some of the **lessons** we can learn from this Scripture reading?

Repentance is a turning away from what is wrong and a commitment to what is right. God's ways are different from our own, but God's ways lead to salvation. We can prepare the way for the Lord by staying in the Word and in prayer. We can receive Jesus by repenting of our sins and believing in him.

Please bow your heads in prayer.

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Heavenly Father, thank you for the good news that John the Baptist reveals. It is good news not just for us, but for the whole world to see God's salvation. Help us to stay in fellowship with God's people and help us to respond quickly when we are convicted of sin. Help us to remember that repentance is a life-giving process that involves confessing our sins, drawing near to God, and bearing the fruit of salvation. And help us to be ever vigilant and to prepare for Christ's coming. We ask for this in the name of your Son, and our Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.