

## **Series Gospel of Luke**

### **This Message #3 Good News in Bad Times**

#### **Scripture Luke 3:1-18**

We are on the front end of our series of messages from the Gospel of Luke. It is important that we keep in mind the purpose for this gospel account. Doctor Luke wanted to gather together in one orderly account all the important remarkable events in the earthly life of Jesus. He wanted his friend, a Roman official named Theophilus, and us, to know with “certainty” the things which were being taught by the followers of Jesus.

Luke was a unique investigative reporter. He had interviewed many of the eyewitnesses who had been closely associated with Jesus, including Mary, the human mother of Jesus. In addition, Luke was aware of the Old Testament prophecies which were fulfilled through the incarnation, life, teachings, and crucifixion of Jesus, and he was acquainted with the impact that the preaching and teaching about Jesus had on both Jewish and Gentile believers.

And so, because he had “carefully investigated everything from the beginning,” his Gospel account should give us confidence about Jesus Christ — who He was and what He did. If we get our hearts and minds properly oriented to who Jesus was and what He did, then we will have direction and purpose in our lives while we are here on earth and confidence about where we will spend eternity. That was Luke’s goal, and also mine in this study of Luke’s Gospel.

John the Baptizer was the link between the revelation of God in the Old Testament period and the coming of the Messiah. The ministry of John had been predicted in the Old Testament, just as there were predictions about the Messiah. The appearance of John was a confirmation that Jesus was truly the Messiah. Therefore, if Luke was to provide a thorough account of “things that were fulfilled,” then the birth of John had to be described along with the birth of the Messiah.

In today’s passage, we are approaching the time of Jesus’ public ministry. Both John and Jesus are about 30 years of age. John was the individual designated by God to introduce Jesus to the world. We have already read the Old Testament background passage concerning John. Now let’s read the New Testament fulfillment.

## Read Luke 3:1-18

Luke begins this passage by listing the political and spiritual leaders who were in power. By mentioning the names of the various public and spiritual leaders, Luke not only wanted to pinpoint the time of John's ministry but to depict the circumstances in Israel at that time. The names in verses 1 and 2 point to rather dark conditions. Israel was under the domination of Roman pagan powers. Political authority was divided up under several rulers, all of whom were moral degenerates and poor administrators. Even in the religious context of Judaism, the co-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas was indicative of chaos. They were essentially politicians who cared more about their relations with Rome and their privileged status than about religious activities.

It was into these corrupt political and spiritual conditions that John began his ministry. It had been 400 years since there had been an identified prophet in Israel, someone to call the people to spiritual renewal and reform. There were only a few people, like Simeon and Anna, whom we thought about in the previous message, who worshiped God and waited for the consolation of Israel.

As we read, God had prophesied through Isaiah and later through Malachi that He would send a special messenger before the coming of the Messiah (*Isa. 40:1-5; Mal. 3:1; 4:5, 6*). What kind of man was this messenger? His birth was a miracle — to parents of old age. Before his birth, God had announced that John would be a Nazarite. Nazarites were people who were dedicated to and set apart for the Lord. The Lord placed restrictions on their lifestyle and eating habits. As a Nazarite, John lived most of his life in desert areas and ate wild locusts and honey. He wore clothes made of camel's hair (*Matthew 3:4*). He was a really different sort of man!

It was in the desert that "the word of God came to John, the son of Zachariah." John was an Old Testament kind of prophet. His responsibility was to warn people of impending judgment and to explain how judgment could be avoided.

John exhorted his listeners to be ready to meet the Lord. This preparatory work was necessary because the people were, generally speaking, not following the ways of the Lord. They did not realize the depths of their sinfulness. Their evil attitudes and behaviors were a barrier between them and God. In order to be ready to meet the Lord, these barriers had to be leveled out. What was crooked and corrupt in their thinking and actions had to be straightened out.

The imagery in verses 4 and 5 came from the practice of improving the route a king would travel on. A rocky, twisty, up-and-down mountain trail might be good enough for villagers, but it would not be suitable for the comfort and convenience of a king. John announced the coming of the Lord, the heavenly King. How does a person clear the way for the Lord? Preparations for His arrival required confession of sins, repentance, and changes in the moral and spiritual conditions in personal lives.

John called the people to repentance and then baptized those who confessed their sins and gave indications that they desired to lead a lifestyle that would be more pleasing to God. The chief characteristic of repentance was sorrow for past sinful behaviors. The evidence of repentance was a change in the direction of a person's life — a turning from sinful behavior to a more righteous lifestyle. Baptism was the outward indication of the inward change in an individual's attitude. Through baptism, individuals demonstrated in a public way that they were getting ready to meet the Lord.

The preaching of John in the wilderness attracted the attention of many people. Scriptures indicate that people came to John out of Jerusalem, Judea, and all the surrounding areas. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that John was the first person in several centuries to appear with such divine authority and strong conviction. Perhaps some people remembered the supernatural circumstances which were associated with his birth or perhaps they were only curious about his exceptional appearance and behavior. What really grabbed their attention, though, was the message he proclaimed.

John's message had two parts. First, he announced that judgment was near. This is in verses 7-9. Secondly, in response to the question in verse 10, he explained that true repentance would lead to a new way of treating others.

John addressed the people with fearless and sharp words. Being a typical Old Testament prophet, he was very bold, accusing some in the crowd of being a "brood of vipers." Vipers, of course, are poisonous snakes which inflict pain and death on other living creatures. People who live selfish, greedy lifestyles are like vipers. They inflict pain and suffering on others. We can understand why John made his accusation when we put the words in the context of verse 8. Some members of the crowd were unwilling to "produce fruit in keeping with genuine repentance." "Vipers" were people who were interested in outward religious rituals but were without inward contrition on account of their sins. Their motives were not sincere.

The Gospel of Matthew makes it clear that the reference to “vipers” was specifically directed to the Sadducees and Pharisees, the religious leaders of Israel. John’s words were offensive to these men. They assumed that by keeping the Law of Moses, observing the religious rituals, fasting, and tithing their money, that they did not need to change their ways. These religious leaders did not submit themselves to God’s word as spoken through John, and John refused to baptize such individuals who had no change of heart.

John had a few more choice words for these unrepentant leaders. He warned them to not rely on their natural descent from Abraham. John declared that God was not unconditionally bound to the physical descendants of Abraham, and that wrath would fall on them unless they became true children of Abraham in a spiritual sense.

John explained that his listeners must not postpone their repentance because “the ax was already at the root of the trees,” meaning that judgment was about to fall on those who didn’t have the appropriate heart attitude. According to John, the outcome was certain: “Every tree that did not bear good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Many in the crowd became alarmed at the urgent words of John and asked him what they should do. Apparently they thought that they had to do something special, perform some kind of works-righteousness, in order to avoid wrath and judgment. John’s main emphasis was the priority of repentance leading to the forgiveness of sins, but, in reply to the question, he urged his listeners to give evidence of their repentance by changing their attitudes and behaviors towards others. He urged them to put the concerns of others ahead of their own concerns. How they treated others would be the evidence of how sincere they were about their repentance.

And so John said that those who had “two tunics should share with him who has none” and “the one with food should share with the man who has none.” In other words, repentant people should “Love their neighbors as themselves,” and to “do unto others as they would have people treat them.”

John then gave instructions to two specific groups: tax-collectors and soldiers. I suppose Luke could have mentioned fishermen, farmers, carpenters, and other groups, but he probably singled out tax-collectors and soldiers because people in these professions were especially despised. The tax collectors were greedy Jews who used their connections with Roman officials to cheat and extort their fellow Jews. The soldiers were also Jews who served under the authority of Roman officials.

What instructions did John give? Tax collectors were not to collect more money than they were entitled to, and soldiers were not to extort bribes or falsely accuse people. People who were truly repentant would no longer abuse their positions for personal enrichment. If they wanted to please God, they had to be concerned about doing things the honest way. They must have neighborly love and concern for others.

John preached and baptized in order to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, but John was such a unique individual, and his preaching resonated with so many people that some individuals began to wonder “if he might himself possibly be the Messiah.” In his response, John quickly and unconditionally stamped out that thought. John gave three reasons why he was not to be confused with the coming Messiah.

First, he explained that the Messiah would be someone “more powerful” than himself. The words “more powerful” do not refer to raw, brute, physical power, but rather to authority. John declared that the coming Messiah would be so great and exalted that he was not worthy to untie the thongs of His sandals. Removing the sandals from a person’s feet was normally the task of a slave, and John, even though he was a prophet, did not consider himself worthy enough to be even that close to the Messiah.

The second area of superiority concerned the results to be achieved by the Messiah. John said that he baptized with water as an outward sign of repentance. The Messiah, on the other hand, would baptize with the Holy Spirit, which was understood to be God’s agent for inward purification, renewal and empowerment, and with fire, which was associated with purging, refining, and judgment. The Holy Spirit and fire represent two vital aspects of the Messiah’s ministry. He would have the ability, through the Holy Spirit, to either cleanse people to make them acceptable to be in God’s presence or to consume and eradicate them.

The third and final point of superiority is an extension of the second. Because the Messiah would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, He would be the ultimate Judge of people. He would be like the farmer who winnows the grain after harvest. When tossed into the air with a winnowing fork, the heavier and edible part of the grain falls to the threshing floor while the lighter chaff, the waste product, is carried away by the wind, later to be gathered up and burned. The Messiah would have the authority and ability to sift and separate people according to their spiritual attitudes.

Most of the Jews in the first Century assumed that judgment would not fall on them because of their covenant relationship as the descendants of Abraham. They thought that judgment would fall only on the heathen, and that they themselves were privileged and protected. John, however, declared that judgment would fall on everyone, including Jews, who was not prepared for the coming of the Messiah.

Verse 18 explains that John “exhorted” the people and preached “good news” to them. Claiming that John’s message was good news might seem a little odd to us, given his strident tone and blunt and dire warnings. We must keep in mind what John was doing. John was trying to get his listeners to look honestly at themselves. He wanted them, and Luke wants us, to understand our need for repentance and to be ready to meet the Messiah.

We know that the Messiah has come once already; we have the Gospels to tell us about that. The remainder of the New Testament informs us that we have the Holy Spirit available to us and He is offered to us on the basis of our repentant attitude. The Scripture assures us that the Messiah will come again as Judge to separate eternally those who are truly His from those who are not. All of this is Good News to those of us who have confessed our sins and placed our faith in Jesus, and given evidence of this by the changes in our lifestyles

### **Some Questions for Reflection**

- Are we convinced about who Jesus is and what He has done for us? (Luke, in his Gospel account, is providing clear answers to this questions.)
- Do we need to repent of attitudes and behaviors in order to be ready to meet the coming-again Messiah?
- Are we, in some ways, like the Jewish religious leaders who thought they were good enough to be accepted by God just as they were?

- When people look at us, can they recognize that we belong to Jesus? After people emerged from the waters of the Jordan River, they were wet, disheveled. The testimony of these people was obvious; they wanted to be ready to meet the Messiah. The test of their sincerity was how they lived the next day, and the day after that. Was there enough evidence in the lives of those who had been baptized to prove that true repentance had occurred?

Question: If we were pulled into court and accused of being a true follower of Jesus Christ, would there be enough evidence in our lives to convict us?