

John: The One Who Comes Before

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- [0 : 0 0] Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this season where we can remember your coming. Thank you for being our Savior.
- Coming as a man, weak in flesh, but strong in spirit, full of the Spirit. So we ask, Lord, that you would be with us this day, that your Spirit would be in this place in our hearts, speaking to us, speaking through Ray.
- May your truth, your message would come through him. Pray all this in your name, amen. Luke chapter 3, verse 1.
- In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, being governor of Judea, and Herod, being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip, tetrarch of the region of Iteria and Trachonitis, and Lassanius, tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Cephas.
- What? Caiaphas. Caiaphas. Thank you. I practiced this. Annas and Caiaphas. The word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness, and he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- [1 : 3 3] As it is written in the word of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.
- And the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. He said, therefore, to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
- Bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.
- Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. And the crowds asked him, What then shall we do?
- And he answered them, Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise. Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, Teacher, what shall we do?
- [2 : 5 0] And he said to them, Collect no more than you are authorized to do. Soldiers also asked him, And we, what shall we do? And he said to them, Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.
- As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.
- He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people. But Herod the Tetrarch, who had been reproved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So today we're studying Luke chapter 3, verses 1 through 10, about the ministry of John, St. Zachary.

[4 : 20] In chapter 1 of Luke, we read about his parents and his miraculous birth. Then in chapter 2, we studied the miraculous birth of Jesus and his early life.

So now we return to John. And the key point made about John is that he's the forerunner of the Messiah. He proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So it makes sense that there are common themes between John's ministry and life, and that of the Lord Jesus, as well as the future church, as well as us.

For example, there's the pattern of the message. John, Jesus, and the church proclaim the good news of repentance from sins and forgiveness of sins. There's the pattern of what happens in their ministry.

Then we'll first have a public ministry, followed by the attraction of opposing forces, and then followed ultimately by the continuation of God's purposes.

So John's ministry and message are still relevant for us today. From this passage, we can ask ourselves, first, will we receive God's message of salvation by repenting of our sins and trusting in Jesus, or will we reject God and his message?

[5 : 31] Second, will we follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, or will we reject him? So we can ask that of ourselves. Quickly, let's look back to John's life in Luke chapter 1.

In verse 80 of chapter 1, it says that the child, John, grew and became strong in spirit, and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Earlier in chapter 1, we also know that in verse 15, he will be great in the sight of the Lord. Verse 16, he will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. He will, in verse 17, make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

And so now we reenter John's life here in chapter 3. John's main role, again, is as the Messiah's forerunner, and his ministry starts in a unique and powerful way, with the word of God coming to John.

This is special because this type of communication, the word of God coming to a prophet for public proclamation, it hasn't happened in about 460 years.

[6 : 36] The last time was to Malachi, around 460 BC, and so it's been quiet for a few centuries now. Luke introduces John as the son of Zechariah, but he leaves out some details that are included in other parts of Scripture.

For example, John isn't called John the Baptist, which we read about in other parts of Scripture. There's no mention of Elijah here. Luke doesn't talk about his primitive clothes of camel's hair, or the fact that he eats locusts and wild honey.

No, but it also doesn't include his martyrdom, right, at the end of his life. But instead, Luke's focal point is about John, from Isaiah chapter 40, verses 3 through 5.

So who is John? He's the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. He's the forerunner of the Messiah. He's not on a separate mission, but he's the first part of the Messiah's mission, and he's preparing a people for the Lord Jesus, for his mission.

We're actually on the other side of that, right? We're not preparing for the Lord, but we're continuing Christ's mission and propagating the gospel. A bit about the historical context, in verses 1 through 2, Luke gets very specific about the historical context, the time, the people, the places of when John begins his ministry.

- [7 : 55] This is actually the most precise dating of John's appearance in the New Testament. Whereas the other gospels, they presuppose that the hearers know something already about John the Baptist, Luke dates John's appearance precisely in world history with reference to an emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs, and two high priests.
- So the emperor is Tiberius Caesar. He was emperor of Rome from 14 to 37 AD. He's the second Roman emperor after Augustus. And Tiberius was infamous for his last few years of reign, where he was super paranoid, and he had lots of trials for treason.
- He was not a popular guy. When he died, the people yelled, to the Tiber with Tiberius, referring to the Tiber River that runs through Rome. And that's where criminals were thrown into, instead of being buried or burnt, right?
- So no love lost for him. The governor is Pontius Pilate. He governed over Judea from about 26 to 36 AD. And he was known for being inflexible.
- And his administration was marked by briberies, by robberies, executions, ferocity. And he also wasn't popular among the Jewish people because he held little concern for them, their Jewish concerns.
- [9 : 14] So, for example, he introduced tokens of emperor worship into Jerusalem. And he also took money from the temple treasury. So, that was not great for the Jewish people.
- And, of course, Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate. The three tetrarchs are Herod, Philip, and Lysanius. Herod, known as Herod Antipas.
- And Philip are sons of another Herod, named Herod the Great, who ruled over this region until 4 BC. When Herod the Great died, Rome didn't find any of his sons capable of sole rule of that region.
- So, they split up the region and gave rule to three different sons, including Herod, Antipas, and Philip. As for the third tetrarch, Lysanius, little is known of him. But we know that he ruled over this region.
- The two high priests named are Annas and Caiaphas. So, Caiaphas was the actual high priest. He reigned from 18 to 36 AD.
- [10 : 14] But both are mentioned because Annas was an influential figure during this period. Annas was high priest from 6 to 15 AD. But following him were a number of sons.
- So that this period is kind of like the dynasty of Annas for this role. So, after Annas, in 15 AD, was his son Eleazar from 16 to 17.
- After that is Caiaphas, who's actually his son-in-law from 18 to 36. And Jesus appeared before Caiaphas. Then, after that, was Jonathan in 36 to 37. Theophilus, after that.
- Matthias from 41 to 44. And finally, Annas in 62. So, with this control of the office, Annas had unrivaled power and prestige among the Jewish people.
- So, why are these rulers listed here? One benefit for us is that we're reminded this is historical. It's not a myth or fabrication.
- [11 : 14] It really happened in world history. It happened in the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar, which is about 28 AD. So, that's when John came out for his public ministry. Another benefit is that it reminds us that Luke did his research.
- In his own words, in chapter 1, Since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you. And finally, it points out that the gospel is the message of salvation for the entire world.
- Not just Jews. Not limited to religious or geographical or political boundaries. It's for everyone. Right? But with this universal scope, there also exists a tension.
- John has received a word from God. But he's located in the wilderness. Not with the high priest in Jerusalem. Not with the emperor in Rome.

Instead, John preaches in all the region around the Jordan. The Jordan River. This refers back to the story of Lot and Abraham in Genesis 13. Back then, Abraham's camp and Lot's camp, their herders, they grew so large that the land couldn't support them.

[12 : 26] There was quarreling between the herders. And so, they decided to split. And Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan. Near Sodom and Gomorrah. Which were later destroyed for their wickedness.

So, this area brings to mind a people who are lost and weak and wicked. We see that John isn't hanging around the powerful and the elite. But instead, just like Jesus will do, his goal is to seek and save the lost.

And I think we can experience this tension in our lives too. We're naturally inclined towards upward mobility. Not downward mobility. We understandably prefer to improve our situation.

We want to move toward influence and power. And don't get me wrong. There's nothing wrong with being educated and privileged.

But we should be sober-minded, not naive or deceived, when it comes to pursuing these things. Right? The world and its pursuits offer us wealth and power and prestige.

[13 : 30] But God isn't swayed by these things. Instead, he pursues the poor, the weak, and the foolish. Mary pointed this out to us in chapter 1. In her song, she says, He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. And 1 Corinthians 1 says about the message of the gospel, The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. A stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. I think we at Trinity, we're probably closer in our outward appearance to the people of Rome and Jerusalem than the people of the Jordan, right?

So we should beware of being the third soil in the parable of the sower. Those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures.

And they do not mature. As Christians, making it big in this world is not our goal, right? Even if everyone else at work and school is fishing after these things.

[14 : 41] Instead, we as Christians are fishers of men, right? We're supposed to be following in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus. Let's look at the next few verses, verses 3 through 6.

Luke quotes Isaiah chapter 40, and we see that the main point of John's ministry, again, was to proclaim a baptism of repentance in preparing people to receive Jesus Christ.

Let's break this down a bit. John was baptizing people, but this isn't just dunking people in the water. It's a baptism of repentance. The word repentance means to change one's mind or to alter one's understanding.

It's a rational decision that involves a willful act. It leads to life change. It's not just emotions, not just feeling bad about yourself or feeling guilty about the things you've done, which I think makes sense, right?

Repentance involves emotions, but it's not emotions alone. It needs to result in life change. I mean, you could feel really bad about, like, blowing 50 grand at the casino from your retirement fund or cheating on your wife and lying about it.

[15 : 45] You might feel guilty about these things and how they impact your wife and kids, but if you keep dropping cash in high-stake poker games or keep cruising dating apps for your next rendezvous, you haven't really changed, right?

You haven't truly repented and changed direction. So there's an inward reality of repentance that leads to the outward action of baptism. And this baptism signifies a resounding rejection of old ways of life and a ready acceptance of God's will that blossoms in behavior, giving evidence of this life change.

Moving to verses 7 through 9, John explicitly instructs the crowds to bear fruits in keeping with repentance, which, again, makes sense, right? Don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk.

Be real and genuine when it comes to repentance. John calls out the crowds specifically on one way they were not being genuine. They were depending on their ethnic heritage and their self-identification as Abraham's descendants, as if this was the most important thing.

But John corrects them. It's not about who you're born from that's most important and that makes children of Abraham, but it's their response to God's gracious initiative that identifies them as children of Abraham.

[17 : 02] Because Abraham, he trusted and obeyed God, so to be children of him is to resemble that, but instead they were a brood of vipers, as John says. And vipers, snakes, they're associated with being poisonous, evil, associated with the devil, right?

And so an application for us is, are we doing something similar? What are we resting on in our lives? How's your spiritual pedigree? Maybe it's immaculate.

You have Christian parents. You come from a long line of Christians. Maybe you've been going to church your whole life. You listen to the hottest Christian preachers. You read their books. But how's your daily conduct?

Are you, is your life when no one's watching, or in your heart when no one can watch except for God, what is that like, right?

Are you loving and kind, or self-centered and greedy in your thoughts? Are you patient and gentle, or irritable and rude in your words?

[18 : 04] Are you humble or proud in your interactions with others? What are the fruits of your life? Now, I'm not saying go and be more moral, right? That's missing the point, too.

In order to bear good fruit outwardly, we need to be good trees inwardly. Carolyn and I have an artificial Christmas tree at home. It's our first time doing that, because we're trying to save the earth but also save money.

And so no matter, like for this artificial Christmas tree, no matter how many fresh apples and oranges we hang on it, it's never going to bear any real fruit, right? It's always going to be a dead, fake tree.

It's no matter, no amount of effort is going to change that fact. And it's similar with us. We're like artificial Christmas trees that somehow need to become alive.

And that's a hopeless task. No amount of wanting it or working for it or making New Year's resolutions is going to change that inwardly, right?

[19 : 04] It's impossible for us. And yet it's an ever alarmingly urgent and necessary task. John warns in verse 9, Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.

Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Even now judgment is ready to be dealt out soon. So how do we accomplish something that's impossible for us but is necessary?

We need to do it. For us it might be impossible, but with God all things are possible. God can make dead things alive, right? If we turn away from our sins and trust in Jesus, God promises us eternal life.

In John 3, 16-17, For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be safe through him.

And this eternal life is possible because of Christ's death on the cross. Jesus died for us and for our sins so that we could be forgiven through him. I think of a wildfire, which is happening more and more frequently, right?

[20 : 13] There was a big one in California recently. And do you know where the safest place to be is in a wildfire? It's in the ashes, right? Where the fire has already burned through because it's gone, right?

There's no threat of it anymore. So God will judge us for our sins. It's not a question of if but when. That fire is coming. And we can choose either to receive the judgment upon ourselves, excuse me, or hide ourselves in Jesus, who has already received the punishment for our sins.

That's God's invitation for each one of us. He invites us to take refuge in Christ. God loved us so much that he already punished him, and he wants us to take cover in him. And if you're living apart from Christ, there's no time to waste.

There's no other way to survive. The time to trust Jesus and to bear good fruit is now. And if you're trusting Jesus for life, we should ask ourselves, what kind of fruit am I producing?

Does my life show over time that we've aligned ourselves to God and his purposes or not? Or is it just words? Moving on to verses 10 through 17.

[21 : 24] In these verses, John answers two sets of questions that pop up during his ministry. First, in verses 10 through 14, different people ask him, what shall we do?

And in response to his ministry, and he answers that for them. Second, in verses 15 through 17, he answers whether or not he is the Christ or the Messiah. So first, in 10 through 14, there's the what shall we do question asked by three different groups of people.

There are the crowds, the tax collectors, and the soldiers. The people or the crowds, actually all of these people, all three groups, they were ethnically Jewish, but functionally considered outsiders by respectable Jews.

So the crowds, they were, quote unquote, the people of the land, the people whose ethnicity was often suspect or disdained by others, right? They're looked down upon.

And when they asked John, what shall we do? John's response to them is basically share life's basic necessities with people in need. Then there were the tax collectors.

[22 : 29] They were ethnic Jews, but not observant. They collected local taxes for Rome. The way this worked is that there were local taxes bid out by Rome to the various localities, and the highest bidder won the contract to collect those loans, or collect those taxes.

And once they won that bid, they paid Rome in advance the amount that they bid, and then they went out to the community, and then they collected these taxes, right?

And that's how they recouped their payment. So the higher they taxed, the more money they made, right? The more profit they had. So their job was basically, it involved extortion, corruption, and greed.

And that's why tax collectors were so hated. They were seen on the same level as thieves and murderers. Jews were forbidden to receive money from tax collectors, because basically they thought their profit was robbery.

And tax collectors, they brought shame on their Jewish families. These guys were expelled from their synagogues. And they were also, there were tangible reminders of Roman rule and domination, which was awful for the Jewish people.

[23 : 40] I mean, think of Nazi sympathizers in occupied Europe during World War II, right? So to them, John instructs them to collect no more than they're authorized to do, right?

Don't extort, just get what you're authorized to do. And the soldiers, the third group, they could have been Jews who enlisted in the army. And these soldiers, they were basically enabled to be aggressive and commit extortion.

Because, well, first, they had weapons, so they could be forceful. And two, they weren't under civilian authority. They were under military authority. And they were told by John not to extort money, but be content with their wages.

So note that John doesn't tell the tax collectors and these soldiers, leave your job and find something else to do. No, his expectation was for them to stay there, but serve in your roles justly and honorably.

And, you know, we should do the same things in our jobs today. My guess is none of us have a job that's inherently compromising, that makes us sin, right? So our task is to serve in our roles justly and honorably.

[24 : 53] A more subtle application of this text is simply to ask the same question that these people asked. What shall we do? In the Bible, this is a typical response to preaching and teaching and miraculous events.

For example, the people after Peter's sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2, verse 37. Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, brothers, what shall we do?

And then there's the jailer with Paul and Silas in Acts chapter 16. He brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? So this is a typical response, but I think for us, it can be easy to listen to a sermon, even nod our heads in agreement, and then just walk out, do nothing.

But it's not enough to hear or even agree with the message. We have to ask ourselves, how is my life going to change because of what I heard? What shall we do? The second question in verses 15 through 17, asked by the people, is whether or not John was the Christ or the Messiah in verses 15 through 17.

It seems like there was a lack of clarity around what being the Messiah actually meant. Who would this person be? What would this person do? They knew that the Messiah brought hope, but they didn't know if John fit the profile.

[26 : 13] So they were asking him. John both answers and helps define a bit more what the Messiah would do. So John publicly refutes messianic expectations, saying that his water baptism would be surpassed by a greater baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire.

And baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire is a reference to the dual character of baptism as both purification and refinement. He also says that he's unworthy to tie the sandals of this next person, right, who is mightier than I.

And verse 17 talks about the Messiah gathering the wheat and burning the chaff. So a quick look at what this is. This is the threshing and winnowing process of grain.

This is new for me because I'm not a farmer and I grew up in suburbs and in the city. So to get the ripened seed of grain, you have to first loosen the seed from the outside husk.

And so that's called threshing. Back in the old days, they would manually do this by beating the wheat. For a bushel of wheat, it would take them like an hour, right? So it's heavy labor. So they'd have to loosen the seed from the husk.

[27 : 20] And after they loosened it, they'd have to separate the seed from the rest of the wheat, from the inedible husk, right? People can't eat the husk. And they winnow it. They would take a fork and throw the grain into the air.

The lighter husk would fly because of the wind. And the heavier seeds would fall to the ground. And this husk that's thrown up and gets blown away by the wind, that's called chaff, right? So we've got the wheat or the grain and the chaff.

So the process of winnowing or separating, spiritually speaking, and judgment, they're still true for us today, right? We are being separated.

We must all respond to God's message of grace and salvation. And we can either choose to align ourselves with God and his purposes and be his grain in his barn, gather into his barn, or choose to be against God, whether that's by open rebellion or indifference.

We just don't care, right? And there are only two camps here. There's no middle ground. And lastly, let's look at the last few verses of the passage, verses 18 through 20.

[28 : 25] So here we see what happens to John near the end of his life. Herod the Tetrarch, he locks John up in prison. Herod was a lover of luxury.

He loved magnificent architecture. Like his father, who had 10 wives, Herod had chaotic marital relations. And, for example, he convinced Herodias, the wife of his half-brother, Herod Philip, and this is not Philip the Tetrarch.

It's kind of confusing, but multiple people with the same names. But he had a half-brother named Philip, and he convinced Herodias to divorce Philip and marry him. And John reproves Herod for this and for the other evil things that he'd done.

So Herod imprisons him. Not mentioned here, but Herod and Herodias later have John beheaded, fueled by Herodias' hatred of John for rebuking their marriage.

Now, remember, John, earlier we saw, he's called great in the sight of the Lord. He's great in the sight of the Lord. He's a prophet of the Most High. He's a voice of one crying in the wilderness.

[29 : 32] Yet he's imprisoned by Herod, later beheaded, and this is John's earthly fate. Does this look great to you?

Probably not, right? Or at least not great by worldly standards. But he was great in the sight of God. Remember that God's value system and the world's value system, they're not the same.

Are you beautiful, rich, powerful, popular? That's great. You've got it all according to what the world says is great. That's the world's standards, but not God's standards.

Even the Lord Jesus, we're told, wasn't a handsome man here on earth. In Isaiah 53, verse 2, it says, He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.

Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. So, not beautiful, born in a manger to poor parents. But God says about Jesus, You are my beloved son.

[30 : 32] With you, I am well pleased. So, as I mentioned earlier, there's a pattern to the life of John, Jesus, and the church. It includes us. We're the church.

There's ministry. There's opposition. And there's the continuation of God's purposes. Following Christ is not easy. It's not comfortable. It involves opposition, persecution, and death.

But it's worth it. It's the path of life. It's the only path of life toward the God who loves us and created us. So, John's message of repentance from sins and bearing good fruit is true for us today.

Whereas John was the forerunner of the Messiah, we as a church get to continue in the mission of the Messiah. And I pray that we would all respond to John's message and the message of the gospel by accepting it and following our Lord Jesus.

Let's take a moment of silence and consider how to apply this passage to our lives as we continue in our service in the prayers of the people. Let's take a moment.