

Introduction

1. When did you first go to work?
 - a. For whom did you first work?
 - b. What did you do?
2. John the Baptist began his God-given ministry of preparing the way for Messiah Jesus by preaching a baptism of repentance in preparation for the coming of God's kingdom.
3. **Read Luke 3:1-20.**

A. The Date of John's Ministry (Lk 3:1-2)

1. Luke gave a specific time for the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry.
2. Warren Wiersbe comments on his specificity, "When John the Baptist appeared on the scene, no prophetic voice had been heard in Israel for four hundred years. His coming was a part of God's perfect timing, for everything that relates to God's Son is always on schedule (Gal. 4:4; John 2:4; 31:1). The fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar was AD 28-29. Luke named seven different men in Luke 3:1-2, including a Roman emperor, a governor, three tetrarchs (rulers of a fourth part of an area), and two Jewish high priests. But God's Word was not sent to any of them! Instead, the message of God came to John the Baptist, a humble Jewish prophet" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 45).

B. The Prophetic Nature of John the Baptist's Ministry (Lk 3:3-6; Mt 3:1-6; Mk 1:2-6)

1. Evidence from Scripture
 - a. Luke 3:4-6 and Mt 3:3 both point to a fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy with the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry.
 - b. Mark had also included God's promise, given through the Prophet Malachi, "I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way" (Mal 3:1).
2. Evidence from His Lifestyle
 - a. Mt 3:4-6 agrees with Mk 1:4-6 regarding John's lifestyle.
 - b. John looked like a prophet.
 - 1) He wore camel's hair clothing.
 - 2) He girded himself with a leather belt.
 - 3) He ate locust and wild honey as he lived life apart in the wilderness as a man of God.
 - 4) Note the clear connection to the Prophet Elijah, who is described in 2 Kings 1 in terms like those used of John the Baptist. "The king asked them, 'What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?' They replied, 'He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist.' The king said, 'That was Elijah the Tishbite'" (2 Kgs 1:7-9).
 - 5) The Prophet Zechariah provided a similar description of the clothing of a prophet when he wrote, "On that day every prophet will be ashamed of their prophetic vision. They will not put on a prophet's garment of hair in order to deceive" (Zech 13:4).
3. Evidence from His Message
 - a. John began ". . . preaching (Gk., *kerusson*) a baptism (Gk., *baptisma*) of repentance (Gk., *metanoias*) for the forgiveness (Gk., *aphesin*) of sins (Gk., *hamartion*)" (3).
 - 1) He preached the truth and called for people to repent and be baptized as a sign of repentance.
 - 2) Note that salvation came not through baptism but through repentance.
 - b. John's message was effective.
 - 1) People were "Confessing their sins" and "were baptized by him in the Jordan" (Mt 3:6).
 - 2) Matthew's account agrees with Mk 1:4-6.
 - c. Wiersbe writes, ". . . John the Baptist was a *voice* 'crying in the wilderness' (Luke 3:4; see also Isa. 40:1-5, John 1:23). He was like the herald who went before the royal procession to make sure the roads were ready for the king. Spiritually speaking, the nation of Israel was living in a 'wilderness' of unbelief, and the roads to spiritual reality were twisted and in disrepair. . . The people desperately needed to hear a voice from God, and John was that faithful voice" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 47).

C. More Details on John's Preaching (Lk 3:7-14; Mt 3:7-10)

1. Details regarding John's preaching are unique to the accounts of Luke and Matthew.
2. Wiersbe writes, "In Luke 3:7, John pictured the self-righteous sinners as snakes that slithered out of the grass because a fire was coming! Jesus compared the Pharisees to vipers (Matt. 23:33) because their self-righteousness and unbelief made them the children of the Devil (John 8:44-45; Rev. 20:2). . . . John is also compared to a *farmer* who chops down useless trees (Luke 3:9) and who winnows the grain to separate the wheat from the chaff (Luke 3:17). Like some 'religious sinners' today, many of the Jews thought they were destined for heaven simply because they were descendants of Abraham (see John 8:31-34; Rom. 4:12-17; Gal 3:26-29). John reminded them that God gets to the *root* of things and is not impressed with religious profession that does not produce fruit. In the last judgment, the true believers (wheat) will be gathered by God, while the lost sinners (chaff) will be burned in the fire" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 47).
3. Charles Erdman commenting on John's message says, "The reason for such severity was that, while wishing to escape the impending judgment, the people were unwilling to forsake their sins. They regarded the baptism of John as a magical rite which could make impenitent men safe in the hour of judgment. John bade them show their repentance by their works and not to trust in their descent from Abraham He declared that judgment was upon them; the ax was already lying at the root of the trees . . ." (Charles Erdman, *Gospel of Luke*, 41).
4. Wiersbe writes, "John the Baptist was also a teacher (Luke 3:12). He not only preached publicly, but he also had a personal ministry to the people, telling them how to practice their new faith (Luke 3:10-14). He told them not to be selfish but to share their blessings with others (see Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37). Even the tax collectors came to John for counsel. . . . John did not tell them to quit their jobs but to do their work honestly. Likewise, the soldiers were not condemned for their vocation. Rather John told them to refrain from using their authority to get personal gain" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 48).
5. John's preaching was well aligned with that of Jesus.
 - a. Both Jesus and John preached the coming of God's kingdom and the need for repentance.
 - b. Jesus also called the Pharisees and the teachers of the law a "brood of vipers" (cf., Mt 12:34, 23:33).
 - c. Jesus also spoke about the need to chop down an unfruitful tree (cf., Lk 13:9).
 - d. Jesus told a parable in which the wheat and the chaff were also to be separated (Mt 13:28-30).
 - e. Jesus, like John, had a significant ministry with tax collectors, soldiers, and other "sinners." This was a sore point with the Pharisees throughout Jesus' ministry (cf., Lk 5:29-30).
 - f. A major difference between the two was that Jesus not only preached the coming of God's kingdom but also inaugurated God's kingdom on earth by His death and resurrection.

D. Is John the Baptist the Messiah? (Lk 3:15-18; Mt 3:11-12; Mk 1:7-8)

1. Matthew, Mark, and Luke agree in stating that John denied being the Messiah but pointed the people to one coming after him.
2. Robert H. Stein notes, ". . . we should see John as a bridge who belongs both to the OT and the NT eras. In preparing the way for the son of God, he both marked the end of the old era and introduced the new (Lk 16:16). Furthermore John's message is understood as identical to that of Jesus and the early church, for Jesus also would preach a repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And even as Jesus preached the 'good news' (Lk 4:18), John did as well (Lk 3:18)" (Robert H. Stein, *Luke* in NAC, 125).
3. Luke openly acknowledged that ". . . the people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ" (Lk 3:15). This question of the people was implied in the answers given by John the Baptist in Matthew's and Mark's accounts of these events.
4. John the Baptist made three important points about the coming Messiah.
 - a. Messiah would be greater than John.
 - 1) "But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie" (Lk 3:16b, underlining mine).
 - 2) "But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry" (Mt 3:11b, underlining mine)
 - 3) "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (Mk 3:7, underlining mine)

- b. Messiah's baptism would be greater and more significant than John's baptism.
 - 1) Mark recorded, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1:8).
 - 2) Matthew recorded, "I baptize you with water for repentance. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt 3:11ac)
 - 3) Luke recorded, "I baptize you with water. . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Lk 3:16ac).
 - 4) Notice that Matthew and Luke both used a sandwich construction and added the element of "fire" (Gk., *pur*) to Messiah's baptism.
- c. John's baptism was preparatory, while Messiah's baptism would be final.
 - 1) John's baptism was focused on "repentance," which done in preparation for Messiah's coming.
 - 2) Wiersbe writes, "It was John's task to prepare the nation for the Messiah and then present the Messiah to them (Luke 1:16-17, 76-77; John 1:6-8, 15-34). He rebuked their sins and announced God's salvation, for without conviction there can be no conversion" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 47).
 - 3) Jesus' baptism would be focused on cleansing, judgment, and the all-consuming presence of God with His people in the fire of the Holy Spirit (cf., Acts 1:5, 2:1ff).
 - 4) Jesus' baptism was also necessary before facing the fire of final judgment at His return.
- 5. Both Luke and Matthew add other elements to John's description of Messiah's ministry as one of fire.
 - a. "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Lk 3:17)
 - b. "His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Mt 3:12)
 - c. This additional teaching of John clarifies the ultimate ministry of Jesus which calls humanity to a crisis of faith in the gospel before a final, irreversible judgment.
 - d. Wiersbe concludes, "John's use of the symbol of 'fire' in Luke 3:9 and 17 indicates that he is talking about judgment and not blessing. In AD 70 the nation experienced a baptism of fire when Titus and the Roman armies destroyed Jerusalem and scattered the people. All unbelievers will experience a baptism of *judgment* in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15)" (Wiersbe, *Be Compassionate*, 46).
 - e. G. Campbell Morgan notes, "And so the King Who comes is to be destructive and constructive—destructive, for the fruitless tree is to be hewn down; the chaff is to be driven away and burnt, —constructive, for the threshing-floor is to be cleansed; the wheat is to be gathered and garnered, and men are to be fire-baptized" (G. Campbell Morgan, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 24).
- 6. Luke alluded to the fact that John had an extensive preaching ministry beyond what was recorded here.
 - a. "And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them" (Lk 3:18).
 - b. Even with the witness of Matthew and Mark added to that of Luke, we have only a small sample of the preaching of John the Baptist.
 - c. Consider the fact that we thankfully have much more of Jesus' teaching and preaching in the Gospels.
 - d. This in itself is evidence to the fact stated earlier by John the Baptist that Messiah Jesus' ministry is greater and more important than his.

E. John the Baptist Confronts Herod Antipas (Luke 3:19-20)

- 1. These verses provide information only found in Luke's gospel.
- 2. John the Baptist preached boldly and openly calling things as they were.
 - a. Like the OT prophets of old, he even confronted the king for his sins.
 - b. Herodias, the current wife of Herod Antipas, had been married before to Herod's brother. So their marriage was considered under the law to be adulterous.
- 3. Among Herod's many sins is the imprisonment of John the Baptist, whom he would eventually have beheaded (cf., Mk 6:14-29, Mt 14:1-12).
- 4. Erdman notes, "The close of the career of John is introduced by Luke at this point of his narrative to prepare the way for his account of the ministry of Christ. It was actually some time after Jesus had begun his work that Herod the tetrarch arrested John and cast him into prison because he had rebuked the profligate king for his impurity and his sin" (Erdman, 42).
- 5. In the next lesson, we will turn our attention to the beginning of Jesus' ministry (cf., Lk 3:21-22; Mt 3:13-17).

F. Reflections

1. Are you part of the wheat or the chaff?
2. Are you filled with the fire of the Holy Spirit and ready for the fire of final judgment?
3. What is the root in which you trust for salvation? Is your trust rooted in calling yourself a Christian or in a living, daily relationship with Christ?
4. Don't look down on others, even if their occupations are bad ones in your opinion.
 - a. All of us are sinners in need of salvation by God's grace.
 - b. If we have done wrong in our work in the past, we need to stop and do what is right from now on. Consider a career change if necessary.
 - c. Remember Paul's command, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Col 3:23-24).