

Prayer

We praise You O Lord, for the great blessings that are ours through Your Word, the Bible. We thank you for all those who have worked to translate it and make it available to people throughout the world. May we so treasure this great gift that we pass it on to those who come after us with reverence and awe, knowing that it has the power, through Your Holy Spirit, to change lives. Thanks be to God: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Look at the things around you; praise God for what He has made, and what He has enabled people to make.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *For centuries, people have worshipped with music, so pray for the musicians at your church and all they do*
- *Continue to pray urgently for Haiti and its peoples, still in shock*
- *Pray for the work of the finance ministers of your governments*

Meditation

I guess we can never know the fullness of God:

How often do we need to seek His forgiveness,
and how often do we need to forgive each other?

How great is the glory He will one day show us
and how great the honour we must give back to Him!

How much more of His love will He lavish on us,
and how much more love must we give others?

How powerful is His Spirit who strengthens us now,
and how great is the Gospel He proclaims through us!

How many great gifts does He still long to give us,
and how much of ourselves do we need to give back?

How magnificent the eternity He has prepared for us,
and from here, how limited our view of His bounty!

But in Christ, we have a glimpse of this now!

Bible passage – Luke 3:1-6

¹ In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, when Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, when his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, when Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene

² and during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the Word of God came to John son of Zachariah in the desert.

³ John made appearances in all the regions of the Jordan river, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

'A voice of one calling in the desert,
"Prepare the way for the Lord,

- make straight paths for him.
- ⁵ Every valley will be filled,
every mountain and hill flattened.
The crooked roads will be made straight,
the rough places smooth.
- ⁶ And all people will see God's salvation."'
-

Bible Study

Review

At this point in Luke's Gospel, we pick up the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry, prior to that of Jesus. Here, Luke makes several points, and each are relatively easy to understand, but they also reveal some interesting information, which prepares us for what is to come. To begin with, Luke dates the beginning of John's ministry according to known facts about Roman Emperors and governors (3:1,2). Secondly, he reiterates what is broadly known about John's ministry (3:3), and then he quotes Isaiah 40:3-5 (3:4-6). This all seems very straightforward, but the more we look into it the more surprised we will be.

Luke's dating of John is interesting. The Emperor Tiberius Caesar began his reign around 14 AD, so the fifteenth year of his reign dates the ministry of Jesus and John as beginning around 28 to 29 AD. This was also within Pilate's rule in Judea (26-36 AD), the reign of Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, in Galilee (4BC to 39AD), and the reign of Philip, another son of Herod the Great, in a region to the east and north of Galilee (4BC to 33AD). Unfortunately, it is not clear who 'Lysanias' was (3:1), though someone by that name is recorded as having responsible for a region north of Galilee (probably in present day Syria). Scholars have long debated whether Luke's reference is accurate!

Lastly, Luke tells us that John began his ministry '*during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas*' (3:2). Annas was the father figure of the High Priestly dynasty, but he served from 6-15AD. The Romans made him retire in 15AD, and though he lived on for many years, his son Caiaphas was the most significant of his sons to hold the office of 'High Priest', from 18-36AD. All this is interesting because it helps us work out that with John and Jesus having been born just before the death of Herod the Great (4BC), they must have begun their ministries around the ages of 32 or 33.

Luke says that '*the Word of God came to John ... in the desert*'. Does this mean that John went into the desert to find his vocation and hear God's Word? It is most likely that Luke reports this to make it clear to us that John's was a prophetic calling. Few prophets had been heard in Israel for centuries, and his call began a new and dramatic work of God.

In John's day, baptism was performed (see later study) by people who wanted to become Jews, and together with circumcision, this was accepted as proof that a person had 'become a Jew' in the eyes of the Law, even without any family connection with Abraham. John preached repentance, but added this rite and insisted that he do the baptising. '*Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*' as Luke puts it (3:3) was therefore like asking someone to accept that they were like Gentiles, in need of God's help before they could live a life acceptable to Him! This is not well known, and the more we look into baptism, the more we will learn what it meant both to John and to Jesus (3:21,22).

Our passage ends with a direct quote from Isaiah 40:3-5, and I emphasise this, because although we may not realise it, Luke is the only evangelist who quotes this great prophecy in full. At this point in their Gospels, Matthew offers a quote that includes elements of Malachi 4:4:5, and Mark includes Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1! Full studies of Matthew and Mark explain why these evangelists wrote like this, but Luke presents a clear and uninterrupted quote of Isaiah. It seems that he wanted to say that of the many things people said about John, the great man did exactly what his father Zechariah prophesied about him at his birth (1:68-79). He fulfilled God's historic Word as the one who announced the coming of the Messiah, and this lies at the heart of our understanding of John's ministry.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The dating of the ministry of John (and Jesus)
- John's ministry of preaching and baptism
- The fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V2 'desert'

The Greek word used here is 'eremos', meaning an uninhabited place, or place where nothing lives, hence the word 'desert'. Although there were many desert like regions beyond the Jordan, the whole region was surrounded by desert, on the east and south in particular, and some parts of Israel could be described as 'desert' because it was uninhabited.

V5 'flattened'

The usual translations of this are 'made low', but the Greek word 'tapeinos' means 'to make humble' or low in a general sense, so we are entitled some license in what it means for a mountain to be 'made low'. I suggests 'flattened' because this dramatic action fits the words and deeds of John.

V6 'people'

The Greek word is 'sarx', often translated 'flesh'. However, John is clearly speaking about the general revelation of God's salvation and it is best to use a word that commonly conveys this idea to people today. This is found in the word 'people'. Later in Romans, Paul uses the word 'flesh' in a specifically theological way, but this is not the case here in Luke's Gospel.;

Significant phrases

V3 'He made appearances in all the regions of the Jordan river'

Other translations:

'He went into all the country around the Jordan' (NIV)

'And he came into all the district around the Jordan' (New American)

The traditional translations sound a little forced, but there is no reason why we cannot translate using the more modern phrase 'made an appearance' because this is a perfectly good way of expressing the Greek verb used here. This translation puts the emphasis back where it belongs, on the fact that John used the Jordan as his base.

Going Deeper

The dating of the ministry of John (and Jesus)

There remains some uncertainty about what Luke says in verse 1, and this is very important for the dating of the ministry of Jesus and John. Augustus had rule Rome for 41 years, and it is known that Tiberius began to take some responsibility from him for a few years before the old Emperor died, and as a consequence, some Roman records date Tiberius' reign as earlier than 14AD. This only adds a couple of years of uncertainty to our calculations, but we cannot ignore it; the subject is too important.

The general story of the Herods and their rule is well known. Herod the Great died in 4BC according to the system of dates set by monks in the fourth century AD, which mistakenly placed Jesus' date of birth about five years after his real birth, around 5BC! After Herod's death, the Romans carved up the Jewish regions he ruled into four parts, and shared it amongst his sons (legitimate and illegitimate). The term 'tetrarch' means 'fourth part', and you will see that Luke accounts for each fourth part, each 'tetrarchy' (3:1).

The first of these regions is Judea, ruled by Herod's son Archelaus (4BC to 6AD). He was more brutal than his father, and he was deposed by the Romans who placed a governor over Judea and Jerusalem in his place. When John and Jesus began their ministries, Pontius Pilate was just a couple of years into his governorship (26-36AD). Herod's other son Antipas ruled the tetrarchy of Galilee, and Antipas was responsible for the beheading of John the Baptist (see Mark 6:14f. and Matthew 14:2f.). Philip was the half brother of Antipas, who ruled the neighbouring tetrarchy of Iturea and Trachonitis (north east of Galilee) but there was considerable antipathy between the two of them, after Antipas married Philip's wife, their half sister Herodias. The incestuous relationships within Herod's family make the family tree somewhat confusing! The only uncertain part of Luke's information is Lysanias, whose connection with a 'tetrarchy' of the region ruled by Herod the Great is difficult to establish.

The only other feature of Luke's description of the ruling authorities is in verse 2, where Luke describes the High Priestly authorities (see above). Annas was the father of Caiaphas, yet Luke places the name of Annas before that of Caiaphas even though Caiaphas was the official High Priest. If we read the all Gospels, we will find that the different Gospel writers give different emphases to Annas and Caiaphas; Matthew says that Jesus is arraigned before Caiaphas (Matt 26:3f.), but John says this was before Annas (John 18:13f.). In

those days, most Jews held to the traditional view that Annas was the true High Priest and held the office for life. They only accepted the authority of Caiaphas out of necessity, he had been appointed by the Romans and the Roman governor would only work through him.

John's ministry of preaching and baptism

According to Luke, John began his ministry focussed on '*preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*' (3:3). If we delve into later descriptions of the John's practices teaching, we find that John baptised in the river Jordan; as Luke says, John '*made appearances in all the regions of the river Jordan*' (3:3). This suggests that although John went to the desert regions to find his call from God (3:2) and teach and preach, he exercised his public ministry of baptism near the Jordan. In those days, the territory of Israel was compromised by the presence of a significant Samaritan community occupying the hill country in the centre of the region we would call 'Israel' or 'Palestine' today. Consequently, Jewish people lived either in the southern regions of Judea, grouped around Jerusalem, or in the more cosmopolitan region of Galilee, and any travel between the two regions that avoided Samaritan territory meant travelling down one of the many pathways of the Jordan valley. Consequently, John's ministry of baptism was practised in highly public places, known by most Jews.

John's ministry was to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah, and Luke's description of his preaching suggests that the only proper way to do this was for people to repent of sin. There is no accident in this message. Scripture teaches that sin separates people from God. This is not found in Genesis 3 alone, but it is the only conclusion we can come to in any study of the Old Testament as a whole. John therefore preached a message that was consistent with Scripture; people needed to repent of sin, and this is what John preached.

It is not so well known that John modified the practice of baptism. Now in those days, when someone wanted to become a proselyte, that is a Jew by choice rather than by natural descent from Abraham through Jacob, he had to do two things. First, accept circumcision, and secondly get baptised and confess sin. The Law was about dealing with sin, and the right thing to do was to get rid of sin by washing before taking on the Law and its requirement of obedience and purity, and this 'baptism' was done by the individual, who simply washed! However, John did something totally new, and changed this ritual of baptism forever by baptising people himself; they did not do it themselves, he did it for them! Prophetically, he was saying that being free from sin was not something the individual could do for himself or herself; it had to be done for them. We cannot underestimate the significance of this, especially, John's comment to Jesus that he needed to be baptised by Jesus (see Matthew 3:14f.).

The fulfilment of the prophecies of Isaiah

Luke includes the whole of Isaiah 40:3-5 in his Gospel for a reason. As I have said above, he wanted those who read his Gospel to know that John fulfilled Old Testament prophecy by being the one who announced the coming of the Lord's Messiah. Many Old Testament texts say something similar, as Matthew and Mark indicate (see the texts I have quoted above), but Luke seems to have had his eye on one feature of the prophecy that meant something special to him. If we read Isaiah 40, we will find that Luke 3:4,5 accurately copies Isaiah 40:3,4; however, Luke shortens Isaiah's last verse, see the comparison:

And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 40:5)

'and all people will see God's salvation' (Luke 3:6)!

By writing this, Luke was not being irreverent to the Old Testament text, as he saw it, but in common with many New Testament writers, he felt it quite appropriate to translate the Old Testament himself and provide a shortened version of the text giving his readers the heart of the message. It could be said that Luke's Gospel is summed up in this verse. John the Baptist was the man who prepared people for what was to come, which was the complete revelation of God's salvation, as found in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Each part of the prophecy from Isaiah is of course important. John's own location of ministry (apart from the actual baptism) was the desert, the one place where according to tradition, God's people went if they wanted to get closer to a true experience of God. The Exodus experience of Israel under the leadership of Moses (Exodus 15 to 20) was formative in creating the nation of Israel, and John sought to remind people of God's call to build a people who would be His within the world.

If you read Isaiah 40, you will find that surprisingly, it does not speak about preparing a way for people to travel through the desert in order to meet God, as if God planned literally for a new 'Exodus' experience; it says that a way should be prepared for God to come (3:5,6, Isaiah 40:4,5). Luke choice of this passage clearly states the difference between God's action in the past that made new demands upon the people, especially to keep the Law (see the Ten Commandments, given in Exodus 20). Luke explained John's

ministry as preparing for the coming of God who would, in Jesus, reveal Himself to all people. At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke's quote from Isaiah makes a very 'New Testament' point. God's salvation comes from Him, not from any effort on our behalf. All that is required from us is to be ready. John preached and baptised, but all he asked of his hearers and disciples was to be ready, repent of sin, and show their intent by baptism.

Application

The only part of this text we should consider for application is probably John's core message, which is that people need to be ready for the Lord by confessing sin. If the soul that knows what sin is and is ready to change, even though the change may seem impossible, then the soul ready for salvation. Unfortunately, in today's world, many people do not appear to know what sin is, and therefore, they are not ready for a Saviour.

Today, there is a great need for evangelists to do what might be called 'pre-evangelism'. This means preaching a message about the nature of sin, and how the things we see around us are a reflection of sin, which needs an answer. For example, greed in the financial community results from sin, and we need to find an answer to this if people are to trust banks again. The same can be said, at least in the UK, of politicians. However, the political scandal in the UK about politicians claiming inappropriate expenses is an evangelistic opportunity in the UK, but perhaps not so much elsewhere. Throughout the world, people are conscious in different ways of the terrible consequences of sexual sin, or the sins of rampant pollution of our planet, for example, and it is only when people realise the nature of these sins that they may feel the need to repent and ask for God's help. It does not matter what the sin is, whether it is national, personal or social, the consciousness of sin and a willingness to repent and seek change are the stirrings of the heart of humanity towards God who came in Christ to bring salvation.

Certainly, in the UK and other developed nations, it is said that a higher proportion of people in prison find Christ than in society at large; this is because people in prison have been forcefully faced with sin and its consequences. Whilst many will still wish to ignore God's solution in Christ, there are perhaps more who are willing to listen to the claims of Christ in such circumstances than in society at large. Certainly, the work of an evangelist today is hard because people will often not be willing to accept the nature of sin in their own lives; they are happy and successful and do not wish to hear a message that says something different from what they experience. As a consequence, the church must always be ready with the sure message that God is ready to forgive if we repent of sin. We do not know the circumstances under which people may receive this message, but it is the truth, and despite the problems, we must not fail to be ready with the message of salvation, just like John the Baptist.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does this passage teach us about baptism and how this is practiced today? What is the difference between John's baptism and Jesus' baptism?
2. How can we prepare people for the coming of Jesus into the world, and what does this passage say about our duty of evangelism?
3. Discuss the phrase '*repentance for the forgiveness of sins*', and what this means for people today.

Topics covered by this text

- *The dating of the ministry of Jesus and John*
- *Baptism and the practice of John*
- *The message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*

Personal comments by author

These words seem simple, and we can read them easily and assume that we know what they mean. It was only after researching this text that I came across the fact that John is regarded as the one who changed the practice of baptism from a self performed rite to a public testimony, performed by someone else, who dips the individual in water. Of course, the meaning of this is highly significant, and it is something to which we should give more thought, today.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Ask yourself whether you feel that you have indeed repented of the sins in your life. Privately, all of us are aware of things in our lives that we cannot speak to others about, and we should not bury things so much that we cannot talk to God about them. The more you try to open up to God about such things, the better.*
 - *Pray with someone else in repentance for sin; you can pray in repentance for the sins of the nation, the sins of the rich, for the sins of the church, or almost any other area of sin you choose, but doing this with others can help us change ourselves, as well as the world around us.*
-

Final Prayer

Lord God, You have made the history of which we are a part. You have placed us within our times and places, and You have given each of us our part to play within the world we encounter. Help us to understand it with godliness and intelligence, and help us to play our part in the world, so that Your will may be done, even now. AMEN
