

Prayer

Listen to us, Lord Jesus, and help us listen to You.
Speak to us, Lord Jesus, and help us speak to You.
And then, when we really trust each other and begin to share,
May we come to know the deeper things of the Kingdom of God,
May we share the precious inner secrets of our hearts with You.
And may we come to love our fellowship with You, Lord Jesus: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Give yourself twenty minutes of free uncluttered time to be with the Lord your God, without conditions

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Your home church** *Pray for those who plan its work and are in charge of its resources; may it all give glory to the Lord*
- *Pray about current concerns over the use of the internet in China*
- *Give thanks to God for the work of the charities you support*

Meditation

Teach us, Lord God, what we need to know,
So that we may be more useful in Your Kingdom.

Teach us, Lord God, what we do not want to know,
So that we may accept Your spiritual discipline.

Teach us, Lord God, what we really ought to know,
So that we are not snared by the enemy's traps.

Teach us, Lord God, to re-learn what we learned before,
So that we do not grow arrogant in the things of faith.

Teach us, Lord God, what we are afraid of knowing,
So that we may face the truth and stand tall in You.

Teach us, Lord God, what we can never fully know,
So that we fully embrace the mystery of Your grace.

Teach us, Lord God, to stay true to Your revelation,
In the love of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Bible passage – Luke 3:15-22

¹⁵ The people were filled with suspense, wondering in their hearts whether John might indeed be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John replied to them all, 'I baptise you with water, but One who is far stronger than I will come, and I am not worthy to untie the thongs of His sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear out His threshing-floor and gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

¹⁸ In these and many other ways John appealed to the people and proclaimed the Gospel to them. ¹⁹ But when Herod the tetrarch was condemned by him because of Herodias, the wife of his brother, and for all the other evil things he had done, ²⁰ Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison!

²¹ When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was also baptised; and as He was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came from heaven: 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I take great pleasure.'

Thought for the Day

Text

Thought

Bible Study

Review

In this passage, Luke completes his description of the ministry of John the Baptist. So far, we have heard about John's preaching (3:7-9) and the advice he gave to those who came to him (3:10-14), but now, Luke turns his attention to what people thought about John, and the belief that he was the Messiah (3:15). Luke tells us more about the true difference between Jesus and John (3:16,17), and builds up our anticipation of Jesus' ministry. After this, we read a brief summary of John's preaching (3:18) and find out why Herod had John locked up in prison (3:19,20), and lastly, Luke offers us a beautifully written description of the baptism of Jesus (3:21-22).

To understand this passage, we must remember that it was not written as we might write now. A biography written today would tell us about events in chronological order, and if we were writing about John instead of Luke, then we would conclude with his incarceration in prison, where he was eventually beheaded (Matthew 14:1-12, Luke 9:7-9). However, in New Testament times, stories were written in a different way, and with the most important part of a story coming last. Obviously, the climax of John's ministry was the baptism of Jesus, which took place in the midst of John's ministry, '*when all the people were being baptised ...*' (3:21). This is just a small point, but it is worth bearing in mind when interpreting other New Testament stories (for example, the main point in any parable comes mostly at the end).

John replies to those who thought he was the Messiah by describing three differences between himself and the true Messiah; they overlap a little in the text, but they are easily seen. Firstly, John says that the Messiah will be a far more impressive figure than he, using the simple illustration of saying that he will not be worthy to '*untie the thong of His sandal*' (3:16). Those who thought John was the Messiah needed to raise their sights higher! John's second point sounds controversial; he says that whereas he baptises with water, the Messiah will baptise with '*the Holy Spirit and with fire*' (3:16). This might tempt us to think there are two types of baptism, by water or by the Holy Spirit. However, this is not the case, for when Jesus Himself is baptised in water (3:21) the Holy Spirit comes afterwards (3:22), so God adds the blessing of the Holy Spirit to His baptism through water. John's last point about himself and the Messiah is this; the true Messiah will yield God's final and complete judgement; this is the true meaning of the picture painted by John of a farmer '*winnowing*' wheat and chaff to complete his harvest (3:17).

John's cruel end came after years of preaching the Gospel. We might think that Luke was generous in saying that John preached the Gospel because Jesus' ministry had yet to begin, He had not died on the Cross or been raised from the dead; so surely, the Gospel was not yet established! Yet Luke, the evangelist most associated with Paul (God's evangelist to the Gentiles), was not shy in saying that John '*proclaimed the Gospel*' (3:18). Luke clearly felt that John's faithful guidance of people towards the Messiah merited that phrase, and more than that, his persistent evangelism and faith led him to be imprisoned, and eventually die for what he preached. Some regard John as the earliest 'martyr', dying even before Stephen (Acts 7).

Luke describes the remarkable baptism of Jesus here with utmost simplicity. On the one hand, Jesus makes His adult entry into Luke's story alongside the crowds who came to John. But on the other hand, as soon as He is baptised, the Holy Spirit '*descended on Him in bodily form like a dove ...*' (3:22), and from that moment onwards everything changes for Jesus. This is the moment when John's ministry is fulfilled and his prophecy comes true; God not only blesses His only Son and empowers Him for what lies ahead, he confirms the witness of his servant John, whose ministry is coming to an end,

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Why did people venerate John, and what is the evidence?
- What is the meaning of '*untying the thong of the sandal*'?
- To what kind of judgement does John refer?
- Why did Herod incarcerate John?
- What does the baptism of Jesus mean, and the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Notes on the text and translation

Important words

V19 '*Herod the tetrarch*'

The Romans invented the term 'tetrarch'. It was a title, denoting the authority this man had over one fourth of the region previously governed by his father, Herod the Great. There were four 'tetrarchies' and the ruler of each was one of the legitimate or illegitimate sons of Herod the Great.

Significant phrases

V18 '*in these and many other ways, John appealed*'

Other translations:

'And with many other words, John exhorted' (NIV)

'So, with many other exhortations' (NRSV)

The Greek is idiomatic, reading literally '*now many therefore and other appeals*'. I have chosen what I believe to be the best current expression for this. I have also dispensed with the word 'exhortation' which is used in almost all translations. The Greek word here is entirely general, and can mean anything from urging to encouragement. We do not use the word 'exhortation' in common speech, but the word 'appeal' seems to me to be far more relevant.

V22 '*in whom I take great pleasure*'

Other translations:

'with You I am well pleased' (NIV)

'in You I am well-pleased' (New American)

Most Bible versions have a phrase similar to the other translations quoted above. However, the Greek word used here is more naturally translated 'I take great pleasure in', and I see no reason why we cannot use the word exactly in this way.

Going Deeper

Why did people venerate John, and what is the evidence?

Any great preacher will attract a following, and throughout the ages, people who have had the gift of rousing people's feelings through speech have attracted supporters who have sometimes thought more of them than perhaps they ought. Luke was aware of this, and reports; '*people were filled with suspense, wondering in their hearts whether John might indeed be the Messiah.*' (3:15). The question we have to ask is whether John's disciples were willing to hear the message that he, John, was not the Messiah (3:16-18), and go on to follow Jesus and become Christians, or whether some of John the Baptist's followers continued together as a group until the time of the early church, maintaining his beliefs. Certainly, if such a following existed, then it would have been important for Luke to write as he did in order to persuade the followers of John to receive Christ and become Christians.

Certainly, the first followers of Jesus were disciples of John the Baptist (Andrew, and possibly John - see John 1:35), so these loyal first followers of Jesus paid attention to what John said about the Messiah. Later on in Jesus' ministry, we find Jesus meeting disciples of John who had stayed loyal to him, coming to Jesus with the question '*are you the one who is to come?*' (7:18,19). Evidently, these disciples of John were not yet convinced about the coming of the Messiah, or that Jesus was the Christ. Then, when John was killed, his own disciples came and buried his body (Matt 14:12), and the news about this was brought to Jesus.

In addition, scholars have debated for years about the meaning of the references to the 'baptism of John' in Acts, together with the report of those who supported this (including the influential Apollos, see Acts 18:22f

and 19:1f.). Some suggest that followers of John were still active, and others think that this only represents a branch of Christianity that became mixed up in their theology of baptism! There are a few other documents from the first century that testify to John's continuing influence in the region of Palestine, however, so I tend to agree that Luke's story (3:15-17) is intended to remind these persistent followers of John the Baptist about his instruction to go and follow Jesus, not him!

What is the meaning of 'untying the thong of the sandal'?

An old rabbinic saying, dated 250AD but probably going back much further, sheds some light on John's comment about *'untying the thong of his sandal'* when speaking about Jesus. In those days, teachers and rabbis were not paid, and were often supported through family means or by followers, who performed all kinds of menial tasks for their teachers, out of respect. The saying that has been uncovered says this:

'Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal thong' (quoted from Leon Morris's commentary on Luke)

Now, it is not clear why the unloosing of the sandal thong was regarded as so demeaning. Perhaps an unscrupulous master might ask a slave to perform this task and kick him whilst he did it; but this is only a guess. What seems very clear is that John used this well known example of his day to make a very significant point to those who listened to him. By saying this, John said he was personally willing to stoop lower in servitude to Jesus than anyone would normally be asked to do. John's trust of Jesus was absolute, and it demonstrates John's complete humility.

To what kind of judgement does John refer?

A number of themes overlap each other to give us a feel of the judgement that John felt was coming through the Messiah. Firstly, comes the theme of fire; *'He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire'* (3:16). This is a reminder to us of the Holy Spirit's powerful work of judgement and purification. There are many Old Testament texts that connect the themes of prophecy (an activity of the Holy Spirit) and fire (see Gen 22:6,7, 2 Kings 1:10, 6:17, Isaiah 1:7 etc.), and many more that connect fire with purity (see Mal 3:2, 4:1, Zech 3:2, Ezekiel 1:4f.). All these remind us that God is just, and His coming will always bring judgement. Those who speak of the presence of the Holy Spirit too often forget that He will not abide sin and injustice. The Holy Spirit is not some part of God modified to cope with human sinfulness, He is God Himself, come to those who place their trust in Christ for salvation. Those who say they have received the Holy Spirit must show God's love and justice in how they behave, or they are seen to be hypocrites.

No one seems to have been able to accuse John the Baptist of being a hypocrite! Certainly, the Pharisees and scribes were deeply jealous of John's reputation as a pure man (Matt 21:26f.). Because of his own purity before God and the evident justice of his preaching, John was able to speak about God's work of judgement with authority; it was not his work, but that of the Messiah (3:16,17).

The picture of winnowing was familiar to ancient people, and Jeremiah used it to illustrate judgement (see Jer 15:7f.), however this is not well understood today. Winnowing entails tossing wheat that has been trampled and broken up into the air with a 'winnowing fork', so that the light chaff (the grain husk) blows away in the wind and the pure grain is left to be swept from the winnowing floor into storage bags. Winnowing is the very last action of harvest, after cutting the grain, letting it dry, separating it from the straw, and threshing it or trampling it to separate the husk from the grain. With this in mind, John was saying more than just warning people that God would come in judgement through the Messiah. He was warning of a 'Final judgement', the very last act of God's justice to be seen on earth (something we know has been seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus).

In this way, the combination of winnowing and fire is like the ultimate warning of God's justice, which separates good from evil, and right from wrong. Are we to be the fruitful grain of God's harvest, or the chaff that is burnt by the coming of the Holy Spirit with fire? Jesus Himself builds substantially upon this theme in his own teaching (Matt 6:30, 25:41, Luke 12:28, John 15:6).

Why did Herod incarcerate John?

The reason for Herod's incarceration of John is clear, John's stance against injustice threatened the authority of the rulers over Israel. However, if ever there were insignificant rulers of limited capability and political influence, then it was the rulers of the four 'tetrachies' of Israel, regions split up by the Romans after the death of Herod the Great. The Roman authorities took every opportunity to minimise the effectiveness of local rulers whose job was simple, to 'keep the peace'. Because of the great antipathy between Jews and the family of Herod, with its vague connections to Judaism and reputation for cruelty, it is not surprising that Herod Antipas found John a threat. By comparison, Pilate, who ruled Judea close to where John operated, seems to have paid little attention to him because he was no threat. John was only a threat to false leaders of the Jewish people.

I have discussed the relationships within Herod's family and his incestuous relationship with Herodias in the notes on Luke 3:1-6, so will not include further comments about this here. It is simply worth noting that Herod was not touched by John's religious comments, his prophecies or the fact that his supporters claimed he was the Messiah. He was personally offended by the fact that John had attacked the legality of his marriage (it was not lawful according to the standards set in Leviticus 18). As a consequence (according to the Jewish historian Josephus, writing within the next one hundred years), John was sent to the worst gaol in Israel, the fortress of Machaerus near to the Dead Sea; a place of horror and appalling neglect.

What happened to John warns us that the world will react to Christian preaching if it addresses directly the sins of the age and the people who perform them.

What does the baptism of Jesus mean, and the coming of the Holy Spirit?

Many theses could be written on Luke 3:21-22, because the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is of great significance to His ministry, as well as our understanding of baptism and its place in the life of the church. However, there is not as much information here as is found in Matthew 3:13-17, and it appears as if Luke has pared down the story to a few vital pieces of information. Firstly, Jesus was baptised along with the many other people who came, because He did not set Himself apart for special treatment; any special favours he received came from heaven, not earth. As we will see in our later studies of Luke, this is typical of Luke's approach to Jesus; he shows Him to be one who identified with people in the circumstances of everyday life, thus demonstrating His humanity.

Secondly, and in agreement with both Matthew, Mark and John, Luke records the coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus 'as a dove' (3:22). The dove is a symbol of peace and love, as is evident in the story of the Flood (Gen 8:8-12). It is also used as a sacrificial creature (Lev 1:14, 12:6), and it appears as a symbol of love in the 'Song of Solomon' (Sol 2:14 etc.). The appearance of the Holy Spirit as a dove 'in bodily form' (3:22) is dramatic, and in contrast to the symbols of judgement and fire, this shows us that God sends His Holy Spirit to bring peace on earth. His final judgement is intended to establish what is good, loving and truthful, as well as root out all evil.

The most dramatic feature of the story, however, is the voice of God Himself, who confirms Jesus' ministry with these words; 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I take great pleasure.' (3:22). This blessing is like many other great incidents in Jesus' life; it links with some great Old Testament texts that were well known by people in Jesus' day. The gracious favour of God was shown to many great Old Testament characters, such as Abraham, Moses, and David; but in this case, Psalm 2:7 comes to mind, because it connects God's Covenant promises to David with the coming of His Son to complete His will:

'I will proclaim the decree of the Lord: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"' (Psalm 2:7).

These words remind us that before Jesus could commence His ministry, He needed to be called and equipped by His Father for all that lay ahead. We could say that the blessing of Jesus at His baptism signals the end of John's ministry and the beginning of the Gospel 'proper'.

Application

There are a number of important features of this text, and all of them can lead us to consider how the church, as God's people, does its ministry of declaring the Gospel to the world. The story of John warns us against the worship of individuals rather than the Lord, for God will always use great people and great preachers to do His will, but of themselves, they are flawed characters, just like John. All who respond to the ministry of great people, whether John Wesley, Billy Graham, the ancient church 'Fathers', Martin Luther, John Calvin, or one of today's great evangelists, must hear the warning that we are first and foremost followers of Jesus. We must not allow 'Protestantism', 'Methodism', 'Calvinism' or any such movement to dominate our theology or our relationship with Christ. Their doctrines are not God's Word, but the Bible is God's Word, however radical and transforming their work has been.

This text also has much to say about pure service and love, about 'harvest' and God's last judgement, and above all, about the nature of baptism, as I have already commented. However, we will not extend our 'application' of these great themes just now, because there is much more within Scripture about all of these, and this passage is just one component of Biblical teaching about 'judgement' and 'baptism' for example. It is wise of us simply to note that this passage is a text we might consult when attempting to get a fuller picture of these subjects.

Lastly, it is worth pointing out that John's preaching meant that he was sent to prison not because of its religious content but because of its challenge to justice within society. Today, there is much debate about how to evangelise a world that does not appear to want to know anything about the things of God. Now, this may not have been true throughout history, but this is true within many countries today. Where it is, the

evangelist does well to preach a Gospel that speaks of God's judgement on sinfulness and wrongdoing at every level of society. If we are led by the Lord, then He will make sure that the voices of some will indeed challenge the culture of greed, intolerance and political gamesmanship that seems to predominate the manner in which we are governed. When Christian preachers are put in prison, then its message has become uncomfortable to the world, and the true battle line for the truth of the Gospel are drawn.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does this Scripture tell us about the nature of the Messiah, in contrast to John the Baptist?
2. How much of the Gospel did John the Baptist preach, and how much of it was he not able to preach?
3. What does the baptism of Jesus tell us about our own baptism, or is His baptism unique and never to be repeated?

Topics covered by this text

- *Baptism*
- *The authority of Christ*
- *Judgement and fire*
- *The Holy Spirit's role in baptism*

Personal comments by author

There is almost too much for any of us to take in within these verses, and I wondered whether to split this passage down further for the purposes of our study. However, it is equally possible for us to spend too much time delving into one verse here or there and not come to terms with the greater picture. Studying this passage has certain taught me that ministry takes place in a context, and God appoints both. John could have become very frustrated at the message he had to preach and the end results (being put in prison), but he was faithful in the most difficult of circumstances, and this is our inspiration.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *John had a clear sense of his own ministry and how different it was from that of Jesus. Instead of wishing that you had a ministry like that of certain other people, try to examine the differences between what you have to offer the church and what others have to offer. The Lord has placed you where you are for a reason, but do you know it?*
- *Do you know of any ministers, preachers or other servants of the Lord who suffer (like John in prison)? How can you help them and give them hope for their own ministry and the future of the church?*

Final Prayer

Dear God and Father of all, help each one of us who longs to do Your will. Bless us as we seek to speak to other people about You, demonstrate the Kingdom of God throughout our lives, and worship You in spirit and in truth. May we always remain faithful to our call, through Jesus Christ, our Lord: AMEN
