

LUKE 3/1-14: John the Baptist Prepares the Way

[The Ultimate Man > Handles Guilt > Repentance]

v1-2a: The stage is set for John's ministry

The main (v preparatory) action is about to begin: with even more care and detail than usual (cf. 2/1f), Luke, the scientist-historian (1/3f), places John the Baptist's ministry in period and place (time and space). That is, he ties it to history: this is something that actually happened, not some mystical/religious legend or belief. These events can be investigated by the normal rules of history and be verified (even though they are beyond history). Three areas of detail are given:

(i) Roman emperor: 15th year of Tiberius Caesar – i.e. AD 25/26

(ii) Regional rulers of the 4 provinces that Herod the Great's 'kingdom' was divided into

(iii) High priest in Jerusalem at the time. [Annas was high priest from AD 6 till AD 15, when he was deposed by the Roman official Gratus. He was followed first by a son and then by Caiaphas, his son-in-law. Even though Rome had replaced Annas, the Jews continued to recognize his authority, so Luke included his name as well as that of the Roman appointee, Caiaphas.]

v2b: John is commissioned by God

For many years (see 1/80), John has lived in the desert, being prepared by God for his mission.

He possibly belonged to a community of Essenes, a radical/devotional IT Jewish sect. "the Word of God came to John": both, the Word of God launched John's ministry – he is sent by God, not self; and, the Word of God gave him the 'content' of his ministry – he spoke from (divine) revelation, not (human) wisdom/learning.

v3: John's ministry in summary

John's ministry was one of preaching and baptizing in "all the country around the Jordan".

His message in essence: "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins".

This sounds very simple but needs unpacking to avoid misrepresenting/misunderstanding it.

John's message was *not* that by just undergoing an external/physical ritual (baptism) God would forgive your sins. He is shortly to rebuke people who came with that superficial and selfish expectation.

Rather, John was calling people sincerely to repent of sin in their *hearts* (cf. Joel 2/12-13a, Hos 6/1-4, Is 29/13) and so receive forgiveness from God; then, as evidence of their repentance, to submit to God's call to be baptized, an external/physical picture of God internally/spiritually washing them clean.

No amount of baptism was going to cause repentance if it wasn't already in the heart; and no amount of baptism was going to bring about forgiveness of sin if you weren't repentant.

Conversely, no amount of claimed repentance (of turning to God) was going to cut it if you were unwilling to do what God required (get baptized).

Baptism in itself didn't produce repentance (on your part) or forgiveness (on God's), but for those who did sincerely repent there would be no hesitation in expressing that in baptism.

Sincerely submitting to the act of baptism showed repentance, and the act also symbolized the result of your repentance, namely the forgiveness (washing clean) of sin.

In summary: John called everyone to repent of their sin (to say sorry for their sin and to turn back to God), with the promise (good news! – v18) of forgiveness if they did.

v4-6: John's ministry fulfils OT prophecy

Gabriel and Zechariah have already indicated that John will fulfil OT prophecies of a forerunner to the coming of the Lord, one who would prepare the way for him (1/16f,77f cf. Mal 3/1f, 4/5f).

v4a Here Luke quotes another prophecy that is being fulfilled by John: Is 40/3-5 (but see also v1-2).

"As it is written...": this is it! John's preaching of a baptism of repentance is the fulfilment of this!

Isaiah said a voice would call in the desert – and we have seen that this is exactly where John was.

v4b How is John preparing the way for Jesus, making straight paths for him? He turns people back to God (makes their hearts right towards God) so that when Jesus comes and preaches, he and his message can go right (straight) in to people's hearts and lives.

v5f *Either* means just this – a poetic way of saying that every obstruction to God's Messiah and message (valleys, mountains/hills, crookedness, roughness) will be made level/straight/smooth so that "all mankind can see (recognize, understand and receive) God's salvation". *Or* it may mean that all men are equal before God and his salvation: the humble will be exalted and the proud humbled (this fits in with themes already seen in the gospel: 1/48-52).

By calling people to get right with God, John got them back to where they were meant to be under the Old Covenant, and so prepared the way for the messenger and message of the New Covenant.

There is no doubt that Jesus' ministry was so fruitful because of John (cf. 7/29f).

v7-9: John rebukes religious externalism

v7 This sounds like a very strange thing to say to those wanting to get baptized! Obviously, amongst "the crowds coming out to be baptized" were many people who were not truly repentant.

John, like Jesus after him, was very strong in condemning empty religion / religious hypocrisy.

Clearly, John's message was "flee the coming wrath" – by repenting now and being forgiven. (This was a true message: it was just that some people were misappropriating it. They hoped they could continue with their present lifestyles but avoid judgement just by undergoing baptism.) This means that the first message preached in the NT is 'flee the coming wrath' – vs those who would have us believe that such a message does not appear (belong) in the NC! Note: to want to flee from the coming wrath is an acceptable motivation to repent!

v8a John says to the insincere/superficial: the way to evidence/prove that you have truly repented is to change your life ("produce fruit in keeping with repentance"). In fact, true repentance will always lead to a changed life: 'repentance' (Gr. *metanoia*) means a fundamental change of thinking; and, since our thinking (belief) always determines our living (behaviour), a change of thinking *will* lead to a change of living (an about turn, a change of direction, in our lives).

v8b Other people (with an equally false security in mere externals) thought that their mere Jewishness (membership of God's chosen OC people) would deliver them from any form of judgement. John stops them abruptly from even beginning to mouth this protest against his warning of coming wrath. God can create a multitude of children of Abraham from the many stones that littered the desert. Jewish people as much as anyone else needed to truly repent, to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

v9 God's judgement is imminent (the time for decision and consequence is here!) and every person – Jew and Gentile – who does not produce the fruit that shows repentance will be judged (cf. 13/6-7; Jn 15/2,6). It's not that the fruit saves us (anymore than the baptism) but it evidences repentance (and thus that we have been forgiven). In fact, we can't produce fruit without repentance – and the spiritual changes repentance brings to us.

Summary: John's message (the good news that, if people would repent of their sin and get baptized in expression of this, God would forgive their sin) attracted many people who weren't truly repentant, who thought a mere outward act would suffice even if there was no inner reality, and/or who thought their Jewishness would suffice even if their lives were a mess. No, says John, you must mean it and show this by a changed life.

v10-14: John instructs the truly repentant

Luke then provides us with a contrast: there were many who responded to John's preaching and came to be baptized who were sincere and heartfelt. Their question to him is the same as the crowd asked Peter when he finished preaching on the Day of Pentecost: "What should we do?" (v10,12,14) To each group John provides guidance on righteous living, on what the "good fruit" is that is in keeping with repentance. What is significant here are the identities of those who repent and John instructs: 'the crowd', tax collectors and soldiers. Luke is yet again emphasizing that the good news of his gospel is for all men (the crowd), including previously excluded people like foreigners/Gentiles (the soldiers) and outcast groups like tax collectors. No-one is excluded from God's offer of forgiveness: it's not wrong to be a tax collector – just do it justly. In fact, Luke is suggesting that such people from the start had a more godly response to John/Jesus than many Jews.

The answer John gives to each of the three groups is both incredibly simple and hugely challenging (the will of God is often simple – but it is not easy!). A lot of right living has to do with how we handle everyday matters like food, clothing, money and speech. But this is founded upon a right regard for and treatment of other people: a heart of compassion, justice and truthfulness – i.e. it's not just a matter of externals (1 Jn 3/16ff, Ja 2/14-17). The internal must (& will) lead to the external; the external must (& can only) flow from the internal.

Gospel/ministry angles:

1. Flee the coming wrath (Jesus comes to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, salvation and judgement). Call on the coming Judge to be your present Saviour. God graciously sends us a Saviour so we don't have to be judged. (Remember – this *is* good news! v18)
2. Repent – true repentance: of the heart (v lips), that changes life (produce fruit) – and receive God's forgiveness.
(Do not put your trust in outward acts or facts: ancestry, church attendance, performance of rituals, good deeds, etc.)
3. Acknowledge your guilt and let God remove it (v trying to deny/suppress it) by coming to him. Receive his forgiveness and so forgive yourself. Let God heal you of the stuff you've carried because of unresolved guilt.
4. Get baptized – in submission to Jesus and his word, as an expression of your repentance.

REPENTANCE

What is repentance?

“Repentance”: Gr. *metanoia* – change of mind (thinking) => change of direction (living)

“Confession”: Gr. *homologia* – same word, i.e. to speak the same word (have the same mind) as God about something, to agree with God about something (e.g. our sin – but also his nature), to call it as God calls it.

Some have suggested that because repentance is really just about changing direction, it doesn't involve saying sorry for sin (there is no humbling, brokenness, contrition, etc). Such an idea is neither biblical nor sensible. Any person who encounters the holy God and has any understanding of just how horrible his rebellion against him has been, will experience remorse and say sorry. Just one glance at David's repentance in Ps 51 will show that this is fully part of the moment/process of repentance; see also Isaiah's and Peter's reaction (Is 6/5, Lk 5/8).

Repentance thus involves seeing it as God sees it (calling our sin, sin), *plus* feeling contrite and saying sorry, *plus* then changing our lives to fit our changed thinking (producing fruit in keeping with repentance).

Do Christians need to repent?

Yes! Obviously, not in the same way as when they first came to Christ – a repentance for their sin and sins, as a result of which they received forgiveness, justification, righteousness and sonship. If we sin thereafter (we should not but we may – 1 Jn 2/1), our relationship with God is not broken but our fellowship is affected – and repentance (full and sincere repentance as described above) restores that fellowship. Jesus taught believers to pray this daily (Lk 11/4); and there is no reason to limit 1 Jn 1/5-10 to believers or to unbelievers – it's to both.

GUILT

The world's denial of guilt

Humanism, secularism, relativism (no absolute truth/right/authority), especially in the realm of psycho/therapy ==> Guilt just a subjective feeling/thought put there by nurture; it has no objective reality or reason to exist

The product of now obsolete beliefs/morals; unnecessary; indeed, harmful to personal wellbeing; ignore/expung

Another attempt to quieten God's voice (within and without); another strategy of enemy to deceive/entrap

The reality and rightness of guilt

There is a God – from him comes absolute truth/right/authority and legitimate expectation of our obedience

He has revealed who he is and what he requires in creation, conscience, history, Israel, Jesus, Scripture

Conscience is our safeguard (when not calloused/twisted): it tells us when we are right v wrong to protect us

(Ro 2/13-15)

The Holy Spirit convicts us of guilt in regard to sin, righteousness and judgement (Jn 16/8) – not in order to

condemn us but so that we can repent and avoid condemnation

Guilt is the mechanism (the knowing of the spirit, alerted by the conscience) by which God gets our attention,

shows us our need of a Saviour, leads us to his salvation, and so delivers us from judgement

To deny/silence the voice God uses to lead us to salvation is thus a deception/evil of the worst kind (Ex 34/7b, Le 5/15, Ps 32/5, 38/4, Is 6/7, 24/6, Je 2/22, Ek 18/19, Mk 3/29, 1 Co 11/27, He 10/2&22, Ja 2/10 vs Jn 8/46)

Guilt is an objective reality about us, not a subjective experience/perception; it is a spiritual state and status, not an emotional condition (although some may 'feel' guilt emotionally). Following our sin: shame is our human experience (Ge 2/25 v 3/7-10), but guilt is our status before God. Christian preaching is not about making people feel guilty (as its opponents allege); it simply declares the objective fact of our guilt before God.

Undoubtedly, some people carry guilt about things they need not, but all people are sinful and there is thus a true/real guilt, which we all carry. And while guilt not properly dealt with can lead to various 'illnesses', the problem here is not guilt but the lack of properly dealing with it.

The solution to guilt

The Christian answer to guilt, therefore, is not to deny that we do, or that we should, feel guilt.

It is the good news that God has justly, mercifully and fully dealt with the cause of our guilt and so is able and willing, should we choose to accept his terms (repentance, faith, followership), to remove our guilt

Moreover, as part of the deal, he gives us a new heart/nature and indwells us by his Spirit to help us live out what we have become (holy); this prevents much guilt that we may have experienced in the rest of our lives.

God removes our guilt (when we repent) and then heals us of the 'illnesses' we may have developed through unresolved guilt. His word (truth) also frees us from carrying false guilt – and heals us of those 'illnesses'. When God forgives us, he also enables us to forgive ourselves and others – so removing guilt and 'illnesses'.

E.g. X (not shameful v was shameful, but God removed your shame); Y (anger and swearing – undealt with guilt from having an abortion; repented – able to receive God's forgiveness / forgave self – changed life)

