

The Good News According to John **Luke 3:1-20**

Day 1: Luke 3:1-2 God, socio-political oppression & religious corruption

Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas ... these names mean nothing to us. So the list could seem to be nothing more than a dating technique, situating John's ministry in the chronology of the various political and religious rulers of the time.

But look at the end of this section: In addition to "all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this **to them all**: He locked John up in prison" (3:19-20). Herod is bad, all bad.

And not Herod alone. Tiberius was ruthless, conducting numerous trials against his opponents for treason and sedition, and deporting all Jews from Rome. In his last years, grief over personal tragedy drove him mad, and he launched a reign of terror. Pilate's rule was marked by corruption, offenses against Jewish religious sensitivities, executions without trial, and ruthless savagery. Annas was high priest during Jesus' childhood, and then passed the office to five sons in succession, and to a son-in-law, and then to a grandson. And, of course, Pilate, Herod, Annas and Caiaphas all cooperated in the crucifixion of Jesus.

So these first two verses strike a note of political and religious violence and corruption. And they raise a question: Why did God allow such violence and corruption to persist unchecked? This is, of course, a word from God to Christians that suffer political or religious oppression, that even if God does not deliver, he does see, hear, and keep track. And, to a lesser extent, it is a lesson to us, when a political party or a politician whom we do not like wins office. Much worse happened in Jesus' time, and God was still be in ultimate control. So instead of panicking, we pray for those in office, and for the direction of the country.

Day 2: Luke 3:3-6 The deliverance of God in the face of socio-political oppression and religious corruption

Luke quotes from God's promises to Isaiah, Isaiah 40:3-5, the same book alluded to in Simeon's song (Luke 2). At the time, Isaiah was in exile, nation and temple destroyed, under God's wrath for her pervasive sin. But Isaiah looked forward to a new day, when God would free them both from exile and from his wrath, when God would return them to the land and to his

grace, and when both they – and all the nations – would know God. As God delivered them from Egypt and led them through the wilderness into the new land, he would one day deliver them from exile, through the wilderness, back into the land and into relationship with himself.

This day dawned partially in Christ, and it is a grace that we experience in part, though centuries of Jews, from Isaiah until Christ could not. And so we thank God currently for our deliverance from sin, and we await our future deliverance from a fallen world.

Day 3: Luke 3:7-18 The Good News, and the Bad

For us, the ‘gospel’ is exclusively ‘good news’ of forgiveness and salvation. We even appeal to the roots of the Greek word for ‘gospel’ (‘eu-angelion’, literally, ‘good-news’).

But not so for John (or for Jesus). Luke calls John’s message ‘good news’ (3:18), but it is as much bad news as good. He warns ‘broods of vipers’ (poisonous snakes), to flee from the ‘coming wrath’ (3:7). He warns that God is on the verge of killing them, chopping them down with an axe, like a tree for firewood (3:9). He warns them that God, like a farmer, has already winnowed the harvest, separating useless husk from valued grain, and is about to sweep up, throwing the rubbish into the fire (3:17).

All the same, the message includes good news: those who repent will be forgiven (3:3). If you have not repented and been forgiven, this is your invitation. If you have, John reminds you of the reality others face, and the gospel that we share with them, both of sin and judgment, and of the possibility of forgiveness.

Day 4: Luke 3:7-18 The Necessity of Transformation

Often we reduce salvation to repentance, faith, and forgiveness. John does not (nor does the remainder of the New Testament). Instead, he calls the repentant to produce fruit as evidence of the life within (as Paul tells Christians also): “Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:9).

This is a reminder to us, no less than to John the Baptist’s original audience, that while our works do not save us, we are not saved without works. As the Reformation slogan has it, “We are saved through faith alone, but saving faith is never alone.” What are you currently doing in

service of God? What is an area where your obedience could stand to improve?

Day 5: Luke 3:7-18 The Character of Transformation

Often we reduce the obedience of faith to praying, reading our Bible, attending church and fellowship group, evangelizing, giving, and doing some ministry. Much of the New Testament, especially Luke and James, reach beyond such 'spiritual' activities, as John does here.

'The man with two shirts' (not 'tunic', an outer garment) should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do that same" (3:11). So John commands his followers – and through them, us – to share with the poor. Presumably, keeping only a single shirt, pair of pants (or dress), and giving away all the rest is hyperbole, designed to make the point emphatically. Still, it gives a clear indication which of us are 'rich enough' to share with the poor: basically, everyone.

Then John addresses two groups of professionals: tax collectors and soldiers. What do they share in common? As government officials, they both have the power to take advantage of people. Typically we regulate our government officials better than this. Instead, for us in a free-market economy, it is typically company owners and executives who have the power to exploit others. For instance, before the 1980s, the average ratio of entry-level to top-executive pay was 1:40. In the 1980s, it grew to 1:80. In the 1990s, it exploded to 1:800. And, of course, predatory lending practices have received a lot of attention recently, though, the distractions of competing priorities has stymied proposed legislation to set a limit to credit-card interest rates.

John provides those of us in positions of authority a rough guide to ethics. To those who victimize the helpless, he provides warning: 'Do not use your power to accrue excessive amounts of money at the expense of the needy.' To those who are victimized, he provides comfort: God will bring justice.

Day 6: Luke 3:15-17 The Power to Live as God's People

Few phrases in Scripture are more abused than 'baptism in the Holy Spirit.' A wide variety of groups have claimed it to refer to some sort of experience after salvation, producing a variety of effects, depending on the interpreter.

The first point to notice is that Scripture never uses the noun form 'baptism' in the Spirit. It uses only the verb, 'baptize in the Spirit'. A seemingly small matter, but the key to a big difference. As it happens, there is no such *thing* as a 'baptism in the Spirit', and John never suggested there is.

John is using metaphor: in some way what he does with water is similar to what Jesus will do with Spirit. It's up to the reader to figure out the point of the metaphor. Since his readers were more familiar with the Old Testament than we are, they could more readily decipher the metaphor.

The point is this: John calls people to repentance, and then baptizes them in water. This baptism is purely symbolic; it conveys no power. But as Isaiah (32:15; 44:3), and especially Ezekiel (36-37) anticipated, Jesus does something far more powerful and effective: he gives us the Spirit of God – the inward character and power of God – to transform our human spirit, empowering us for godliness and ministry.

The point is important. John has told the repentant to produce fruit; he has told them to share with the poor; he has told them not to use their positions to exploit the weak. So salvation sounds like what *we do*. No, he adds: it is what God does in us. He removes our hearts of stone, replacing them with responsive hearts. He molds our will to obedience, so that we live neither for ourselves nor out of obligation, but so that life springs up from within us, producing repentance and righteousness.