

1. Introduction

Good morning! At the time when Jesus was born, King Herod the Great, under Roman authority, ruled a large area including what is Israel and Syria today. When Herod died, his area was split among his three sons, and later it was divided into more parts by the Romans. So there were several Herods ruling different areas at different times. We won't sort that all out today, but it is helpful to be aware of this history.

It might also be helpful to know that the word, "tetrarch," is a Roman title for a ruler who was given authority over one fourth of a larger area. By the time of Luke 3, the northern part of the King Herod's territory had been divided into four pieces: Galilee, Abilene, Iturea, and Trachonitis. In today's passage, Luke tells us who is ruling in each place. This information places the account firmly in history and it also reminds the reader that time has passed, about eighteen years actually, since the end of Luke 2. Let's go ahead and read Luke 3:1-20.



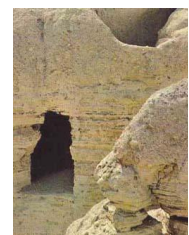
2. Scripture Luke 3:1-20 (NIV)

[1] In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene-- [2] during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. [3] He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. [4] As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. [5] Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. [6] And all mankind will see God's salvation.' " [7] John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? [8] Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. [9] The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." [10] "What should we do then?" the crowd asked. [11] John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same." [12] Tax collectors also came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" [13] "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them. [14] Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay." [15] The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. [16] John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. [17] 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." [18] And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them. [19] But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, [20] Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

3. Teaching

Luke 1 closed with these words (**Luke 1:80**), **“And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.”** The child spoken of here is, of course, John the Baptist. The Scriptures do not tell us where in the desert John the Baptist grew up, however, many scholars believe that John may have lived with a community of Essenes at Qumran. The Essenes were a Jewish sect that emphasized simple living and separation from sinful society.

Many scholars believe that the ruins of Qumran, where the Dead Sea Scrolls were



found, was an Essene community dedicated to studying and preserving the Scriptures. Although we cannot be certain, this could very well be the place where John the Baptist grew up since it would fit very well with the things that we know about John.

John the Baptist was a radical man with a radical message. Having received the Word of God, John went out to preach along the Jordan River where many people lived and traveled. **Luke 3:3, “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** When we read this, we may not realize at first how radical this was, but to the Jews of that time, it was a startling message.



Most Jews of that time thought that they already had God’s favor just because they were descended from Abraham. They thought that repentance and baptism were only for foreigners who wanted to become Jews. But John the Baptist declared in **Luke 3:8, “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.”** John taught that each person needs to repent of their sins and make a decision to serve God. To the Jews, this was a radical message, but it is true.

Today, some people think that because they grew up going to church and or because they were baptized as a child that they are Christians. But if they have never repented of their sins and made the decision to follow Jesus, then they are not saved. God is not fooled and we should not be fooled either. Each person needs to make a real decision to repent of their sins and to trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.



E. Stanley Jones, a missionary to India, put it this way. “*God doesn’t have any grandchildren.*” In other words, we are either adopted sons or daughters of God, or we are not. When a person is saved, God adopts them into His family as a son or daughter. But each person needs to make their own decision to believe - your parents’ decision, or teacher’s decision, or pastor’s decision is not enough. You need to make your own decision.



John quoted Isaiah 40:3-5, saying (**Luke 3:4-6**), “**As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: ‘A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God’s salvation.’**” In ancient times, when the king made a journey, workers would go ahead of him to repair and improve all of the roads. But Isaiah and John are not talking about physical roads; the Scripture is speaking of the condition of the heart. The rough ways and crooked paths of our hearts need to be straightened and smoothed so that the Savior can come in without hindrance or delay. In other words, we need to repent of all of our sins and ungodly ways in order to prepare the way for Jesus and His Holy Spirit to come into our hearts.

We need to repent of pride, idolatry, dishonesty, covetousness, jealousy, and every other sin. When these rough and crooked places in the heart are corrected, then we are ready to be filled with His Spirit and to walk in His ways. If we covet our neighbor’s wife or their car or home, or if we are lying and cheating others, or bowing down to the idols along the roadside or at shrines and temples, or if we are arrogant and prideful, then these sins will hinder the work of God in our hearts. But when we make the way straight and smooth, then the love and peace of God fills our hearts and we are empowered to share the Good News of Jesus

People who were coming to John to hear his message and to receive baptism wanted practical advice for their lives also. The crowds asked what they should do, and (**Luke 3:11**), “**John answered, ‘The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.’**” In other words, John told the people that they should be generous in caring for and loving one another. The tax collectors also asked what they should do, and John told them that they should not collect any more from people than the law required. And the soldiers asked what they should do, and John said they should be content with their pay and not accuse anyone falsely.

No doubt, many people who worked at many different kinds of jobs came to John and asked how to live

righteous lives, but it is very interesting to notice that Luke speaks of the two examples of tax collectors and soldiers. Tax collectors and soldiers were despised by the Jews of the time because they worked for the Roman government. If a Jew worked for the Romans, he was considered a traitor to his own people. But John did not tell the people in these despised occupations to find other jobs, he simply told them that they must not use their position to steal from others.



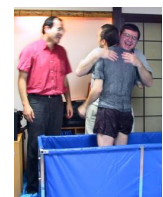
John the Baptist recognized that even though the people despised tax collectors and soldiers, that there was nothing inherently sinful in these occupations. John did not tell them to change jobs, only to be honest and kind in carrying out their duties and to resist the temptations that came with these jobs. Today, some people wonder if they can continue in their job if they become a Christian, but in most cases it is okay to continue the same work and to strive to do the job well and honestly. Only in cases where the job is inherently sinful is it necessary to leave the job.

John the Baptist condemned the sins of kings and rulers as well as the sins of the common people. Because of his boldness and powerful message, some people thought that John was the Messiah, but John denied this using these words. **Luke 3:16, "John answered them all, "I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."** In those days, when a guest came, a servant of the house would come and remove the guest's sandals and wash his feet before he came in. So, John the Baptist is saying that the Messiah is so great that John would not even be worthy to remove His sandals and wash His feet. John was a great prophet, but the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ, is far greater. John baptized with water, but Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and with cleansing fire that removes the stain of sin.

One time when Paul arrived at Ephesus, he found some disciples who had been baptized only by John the Baptist. Paul explained to them in **Acts 19:4-6, "Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied."**

When we trust in Jesus for salvation, then the Holy Spirit comes and dwells in our hearts. In some cases people are dramatically filled with the Spirit and miraculous signs are given. But, in most cases, there is no dramatic outward sign, but there is a miracle, because when people come to saving faith in Jesus, they are cleansed of their sins and the Holy Spirit comes to live in their hearts. In the case of the disciples that Paul baptized in Acts 19, their faith in Jesus came at the same time as their baptism. But in many cases people believe in Jesus and receive the Holy Spirit before they are baptized in water. It is faith in Jesus that makes the difference, not the ceremony of baptism.

Nonetheless, baptism is important. Jesus commanded the disciples in **Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."** And the church today still needs to obey this command, baptizing those who have come to faith in Jesus and teaching them all that Jesus taught. So baptism is not essential for salvation, but it is important for the life of the church and for the discipleship of the believer.



In **Luke 3:17**, John continues to speak of Jesus, saying, **"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."** If you have lived in the city your whole life, then you may have no idea what this verse is saying. But it is not so difficult. "Winnowing," is the process of separating the edible part of the grain from the husk and the waste parts. So the image is of a farmer who has harvested a wheat field. He has a large winnowing fork, and he is separating the wheat from the chaff. The chaff is light, so when he throws a forkful into the air, the chaff blows away the wind, but the wheat falls to the ground. When he is finished, the clean wheat will go into the barn. But the chaff is to be burned in fire.



The Bible often uses the image of a harvest to show how the Lord is looking for a harvest of souls for His Kingdom to be with Him and enjoy heaven forever. But the Scripture also warns that those who refuse God's mercy will be separated from the harvest; the chaff will be burned in the fire. The Lord draws us to Himself with kindness and love and His grace and mercy are sufficient for all who repent and call upon His Name. But the wicked will be judged by God, and this also is good and right.

4. Conclusion

John the Baptist was imprisoned by Herod and eventually killed. But John is alive forever in heaven with the Lord; and he has surely received a great reward for his faithful ministry. A few years after John and after Jesus had completed His ministry and returned to heaven, at the time of Pentecost, when the disciples received power from the Holy Spirit, Peter stood in the temple and preached a message to the crowds. The people responded saying, "What shall we do?" And Peter answered in **Acts 2:38-39**, **"Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off--for all whom the Lord our God will call.""**

Almost two thousand years later, here in Osaka, far away from Jerusalem, the message and the promise are the same for us and for our families today. **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."** Let's pray!

5. Closing Prayer