

The Word of God Came

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Let me introduce you to this John the Baptist. The dude lived out in the desert. He wore camel's hair garments and had a leather belt. He ate locusts and wild honey. And, we know all of this was out of the ordinary because both Matthew and Mark mention these things in their gospels, but they don't mention what other people wore or consumed. (For instance, there was a dude from my high school who wore a kilt to school. I wouldn't tell you that, or even remember that, if everybody wore kilts.) So, it's fair to say that John the Baptist was a little different.

Yet, he wasn't just eccentric. These things were of great spiritual significance to the Jewish community to which he came. They connected John to a great prophet from Israel's history—the Prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). He wore similar garments. And, even more importantly, the appearance of such an “Elijah” was to be the sign of the coming of the Christ (Malachi 4:5). The great day of the Lord God's coming—the day the Israelites were longing for—is being announced here.

Friends, that's precisely what Luke shares with us. That great day is at hand. That's what John is telling the masses. Let's read about it together.

Luke 3:1-20

3 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 wilderness. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘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 people 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, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.”

¹² Even tax collectors 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 Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and 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 proclaimed the good news....

¹⁹ But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to 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.

John the Baptist comes strong. Doesn’t he? I mean his ministry is in your face. His preaching is in your face. Yet it’s not without gospel; it’s not without good news. And, we see that when we look at the two central thrusts of his preaching ministry.

(1st) John tells us that **all are in trouble**. From greatest to least, we have a problem—a lack of holiness problem or a sin problem. (2nd) John tells us that **all are in luck**. And, he points us to a very specific message of hope.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

1. All of us are in trouble.

In the New Testament book of Romans, the apostle Paul tells us not to think of ourselves more highly than is reasonable (Romans 12:3). He tells us to be “sober” in our thinking about ourselves—clear and honest in our thinking about ourselves. And, he commands us to think of ourselves this way through the lens of God's mercy and grace to us in Jesus Christ. In short, Paul says: *When you think of yourselves, remember that you are a sinner saved by grace in Christ.*

Friends, that's the Christian identity. That's who we are.

In our time, such thinking has become more and more foreign or alien to us. We don't naturally think this way. Instead, we're encouraged to think of ourselves as perhaps more important and more capable and more beautiful than we really are. I wonder if you would agree with me.

Here are a few things we're told that give us an unbiblical view of ourselves. These were just off the top of my head.

- Listen to your desires. Follow your heart. *But, friends, what if the desires of our hearts are sinful?*
- You are the captain of your soul. You are the only authority over your life. *But, what if we were created by and for one who is greater than we are—who has authority over everything?*
- You can do anything you set your sights on. You can transcend adversity. *But, what if you can't because you have limitations and flaws and needs—what if you're not all that powerful?*

Man! So many times during my life I've found myself believing in these kinds of things. When I went to college, I thought I was going to be just like Will Hunting from the movie *Good Will Hunting*. (You know, the genius!) No matter that my IQ

was really just average. No matter the fact that I didn't really like math all that much. No, those things weren't the problem. All I really needed to do was to apply myself, and then I would amaze everyone. I'd be a great success in the world of academics. *I'd transcend!* Except I didn't and just got thru school like most of my friends.

At other times, when I've bought into the lie that I should listen to my desires and that they'll bring me happiness, I've often found myself less happy and content. It happens in all kinds of ways—food and drink, relationships and sex. You name it. Taking what we want, taking what we desire, often only leaves us empty and broken *because* our desires are so often empty and broken.

Friends, all of us are in trouble on our own. All of us are broken on our own. That's precisely why John the Baptist preaches an “in your face” repentance message to the crowds. They need to *not* think of themselves more highly than is reasonable. They need to know they're in trouble. They need to know they're sinful.

Look again at what the Baptist says to the crowds.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 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. 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” (vv. 7-9).

Oh, how often it's tempting to preach to you this way—*You brood of vipers; you scum of the earth. Who warned you to turn on the worship service this morning?* You know, it really feels good to say that.

But, in all seriousness, consider what he's saying. **First**, notice that John says that repentance means changed living. If you repent, there'd better be fruit to show for it. Now don't miss the weight of that statement. How often do we say we're sorry, and yet we don't truly mean it and so later we sin again? How many times do we go to God for forgiveness only to do the very same thing as soon as there's temptation? Well, John the Baptist tells us that *that* won't do.

The ax is at the root! The fire is white-hot!

Second, notice that John says there are no excuses. There will be no salvation by association. You can't say that you're part of Abraham's family and expect grace. You can't have perfect attendance at a great church—*which preaches the Bible!*—and therefore expect to receive mercy. Again, that's not how God works.

That tree gets cut down! That tree gets thrown into the flames!

Now at this point, you might wonder why crowds flocked to hear John preach. Why would you go out to hear such bad news? To find out you're in trouble?

Well, **first** it's because deep-down inside we know it's true. We know we're in trouble. We know we're not totally capable or beautiful. We know we're flawed. That's why there were 18.6 million self-help books sold in 2019. And, that industry has a growth rate of 11% since 2013.¹ We know we're sinners. A **second** reason is because the word of God is effective. The voice of God draws people and bears fruit. And, John the Baptist was preaching the very word of God. That's what Luke says: "...the Word of God came to John" so he began preaching (v. 2). And people came—tax collectors, soldiers, the rich, and the poor. All kinds of people came.

Friends, this is why we as a congregation are committed to a weekly ministry of preaching the Bible, God's word—because only when people hear the very voice of God will they come and be truly transformed. Amen.

Well, John's message wasn't all bad news either. He tells us there's hope.

2. All of us are in luck.

Where do we see hope? Where do we see the gospel? Well, Luke quotes a text from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah so as to characterize John the Baptist's work. Look at that text with me.

"A voice of one calling in the wilderness, / '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 people will see God's salvation'" (vv. 4-6).

Some people wondered whether John was the Messiah—the Savior of Israel. And to them, John is super clear. He is not even close to that great. He's not worthy of untying the sandal straps of the Christ. In short, John is saying I'm just like you.

¹ See [this](#) study.

I'm a sinner in need of a Savior. And, I love his answer because it bears repeating. It's a corrective for us today because we try to do the same kind of thing with leaders who are charismatic and flashy; don't we?

If you look to me for salvation, you'll be in trouble. If you look to a president for salvation, it's going to be bad news in the end. And John says this. *Amen!*

So, John isn't the good news. No mere human being can be the good news. So, where is it? Well, it's in the topography. It's in the mountains being "made low." It's in the valleys being "filled in." It's in the "crooked" ways being made "straight." It's in the "rough" paths being made "smooth." The topography pictures "salvation" for "all people."

Tim Keller, I think, has popularized the gospel formulation which tells us all that we are more sinful before God than we could ever imagine yet, paradoxically, we are simultaneously more loved by him than we could ever dream.² The paradox is that the same message humbles us and exalts us. We both recognize the ugly depth of our sin and the beautiful height of our glory in Christ. Friends, the ground is level when we stand before the cross of Jesus Christ. The mountains of human arrogance and pride are made low. The valleys of human self-loathing and despair are filled in. All our sinful paths are made straight and smooth before the cross of Christ. *Amen!* This is a gospel topography.

This morning, I don't know where you are. Many of you are likely puffed-up with your own greatness, with your own accomplishments, and with your own glory. If that's you, then stand before the cross of Christ and be humbled.

The depths of your sins against God sent Jesus to that cross.

On the other hand, many are in the opposite place. Many of you feel laid-low by your failures, by the darkness of your situation, and by the depravity of your sins. If that's you, then stand before the cross of Christ and be exalted.

God's towering love for you sent Jesus to that cross.

² See [this](#) article from *Desiring God*.

This is the paradox of the gospel. This is the topography of following Jesus. This is what John Newton felt when he wrote the lyrics to his hymn, *Amazing Grace*. He felt the depths of his sin and also the heights of God's love.

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound. / That saved a wretch like me! / I once was lost, but now am found; / Was blind, but now I see. / 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, / And grace my fears relieved; / How precious did that grace appear / The hour I first believed.*³

³ John Newton, *Amazing Grace*, 1772.