

A Bible Lesson on Luke 3:1-18 (ESV¹)

Luke's gospel is a carefully done piece of historical writing. Apparently the Greek in the book is just excellent and there are many details that make clear how Luke is being sure he has the story straight and is conveying it in a most accurate and verifiable manner.

Luk 3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,

Note that here, in this single verse, Luke gives us 5 statements of when this all took place. He is very interested in tying what he's going to present to verifiable times and places and people. The fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar seems to put this in 27, 28 or 29 AD.

Luk 3:2 during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

This was in high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. There was only one high priest at a time. Annas was actually officially high priest from 7 AD to 14 AD. But at this time the office was subject to all kinds of political intrigue. There were 28 different official high priests from 36 BC until 27 AD. Annas was actually succeeded by 4 of his sons and his son-in-law, Caiaphas. It is actually Caiaphas who was officially high priest at this time, but the Jews also recognized the authority of Annas and that's why both Annas and Caiaphas are mentioned here.

JC Ryle points out in his commentary on Luke that this is a mostly rotten list of people in verses 1 and 2. (Josephus seemed to think Philip was a person of character) and he encourages his reader to take hope, that in the dark hour, even with scoundrels in charge, God can break in with power. He sent His Son, the Savior in such a time. That, Ryle says, ought to give us energy to keep on keeping on.

The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah. John, the cousin of Jesus is a prophet, spoken about here in the same way the Old Testament speaks of prophets like Jeremiah and the rest. John is out here doing this not because he thinks it would be fun, but at the direction of God.

Luk 3:3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John was out in the country near the Jordan, where travelers would be resting up after crossing the desert. He was preaching repentance. A characteristic of all real Biblical preaching is the call for repentance. God has never been in the business of making peace with us so that we could go on walking our own way, doing our own thing. The Old Testament prophets preached repentance, John preached repentance, Jesus preached repentance, the early Christian church preached repentance, the church through the ages has preached repentance, and if we are to be Biblical people we too will preach repentance. Repentance doesn't save us, only the shed blood of Christ can do that. But without repentance there is no salvation. Ryle said, "We must know our sins, mourn over them, forsake them, abhor them, or else we shall never enter the kingdom of heaven. There is nothing meritorious in this. It forms no part whatever of the price for our redemption. Our

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salvation is all of grace, from first to last. But the great fact still remains, that saved souls are always penitent souls."

Luk 3:4 As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Luk 3:5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways,

Luk 3:6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

Luke quotes from **Isaiah 40:3-5**. The picture is one of a herald, announcing that a king is going to visit a remote part of his realm. The people of the province are naturally anxious to present themselves and their territory in the best possible light. And they, in particular, carry out a public works campaign, fixing up the roads of the province that the king is going to travel.

Luke correctly sees the work of John the Baptist as an exceedingly important historical matter. Here is the one announcing the coming of the Son of God. It is important to Luke (and us as well) that verse 6 promises that all of mankind, gentile as well as Jew, are going to see the salvation of God.

Luk 3:7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

John said. The tense of the verb is that John "used to say." Here's a standard line from the sermons of John. It is interesting, especially in light of post-modern horror of saying anything that might frighten or offend a person standing outside the forgiveness of God. John calls the people coming to him to be baptized "vipers." The vipers are running from wrath to come. The image here is one of animals fleeing in front of a wildfire in an arid place. Picture the southern California canyons ablaze and snakes coming out of their holes as it draws near. John says to his listeners that they remind him of such critters. John looks out and sees sick souls and desperate diseases need serious medicine. It is not kindness to let the unconverted slip off into eternity with no warning.

John gives his listeners some credit for having sense enough to see the fire coming and flee, but he tells them that more is required than that they simply wish to avoid the consequences of their sin.

Luk 3:8 Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The verb tense intends "continually bring forth fruit." The call of God has always been and always will be a call to righteous living. Our behavior is not what gives us right standing with God. It is our trusting in, relying upon, cleaving to, depending on, believing in Him. But righteous living does follow that kind of real faith. A lack of it reveals that we have not truly met God. Religious talking without righteous doing is worthless. Ryle put it "To say that we are sorry for our sins is mere hypocrisy, unless we show we are really sorry for them by giving them up."

The Jew might say to himself "I have a relationship with God because I'm a part of the chosen people. There is no need to worry about how I behave." John identifies that for the foolishness that it is. John is absolutely insistent that right actions must follow from true faith and warns that presuming upon being part of the chosen people is nuts. The God who made the universe could, if necessary, make himself a people who

would love and obey Him from the rocks. If John's listeners won't live right they have no claim on God's favor.

Luk 3:9 Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

A fruit tree that bears no fruit is useless. It only takes up space where another, more productive tree could be grown. God is merciful and kind. But He is also severe and completely realistic. He gives us the means to use to produce fruit and He expects it from us. Take the parable of the talents as an illustration. We are to be making good with God's ample provision, and bearing the fruit of righteousness. The same was true of John's listeners.

Luk 3:10 And the crowds asked him, "What then shall we do?"

These folks are getting serious. They are asking the right kind of question. How, in the light of the Truth that we've heard, should we then live? That should be our response to hearing and reading the Gospel. John's advice for his hearers would be good for us to hear as well.

Luk 3:11 And he answered them, "Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise."

John is talking to the crowd who has come out to the Jordan. These are not the executives of the Fortune 500 companies and the movers and shakers of government in Jerusalem here. And if this is ordinary people he's talking to, who is exempt from this call to be generous and to share with those in need?

We need to listen to what John says and does not say here. He does not say "think that generosity and sharing are good things." He does not say "Applaud those who are generous and share." He does not say "Organize a walkathon and get other people to share." What he says is "You be generous and share with those who have less."

There were people of various occupations that came to John and among them were the tax collectors. These people were Jews that worked for the Romans and were generally held in contempt, first because they were looked on as traitors, and second because they often collected much more than was required, keeping the excess as a bounty for their efforts and getting rich in the process.

Luk 3:12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

John's reply is important, and different from what we might perhaps expect. He doesn't say "Quit your job." Instead

Luk 3:13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than you are authorized to do."

That is, there is nothing intrinsically immoral about your job. What is immoral/wrong is the cheating that you do in its execution. Stop that! Do the job in a moral fashion! Be honest in your dealings as tax collectors. Don't take advantage of people.

There were also soldiers that came. Possibly these were guys sent from Jerusalem to keep order. Possibly they were from the palace or temple guards. Whatever the situation, it seems that just as is the case these

days in many parts of the world, these soldiers were used to throwing their weight around and extorting from ordinary people that which they had not earned.

Luk 3:14 Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages."

The sense of the question is "And we, what shall we do?" You get the picture here of repentant members of a crooked police force who have been extorting protection money from small business owners. They have been taking by force or intimidation from people that which is not theirs, they have not earned and they have no right to. They are recognizing their guilt and ask what they should do.

What does John say? Get out of that corrupt line of work? No, the job is not intrinsically immoral, it is your behavior in it that is wrong. Stop it! Do the job in a moral fashion! Don't look for what you haven't rightfully earned.

Luk 3:15 As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ,

This was a time of anticipation, of longing for the coming of Messiah and what the Jews thought would be political liberation from the Romans. This guy John was a powerful individual. They thought that perhaps he was Messiah. But as flattering as that question might have seemed, John wanted no part of such confusion. He lets people know quite clearly that he is only the herald, that the King is yet to appear.

Luk 3:16 John answered them all, saying, "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

John doesn't want any credit. He isn't looking for a following. He's not glorifying his place in God's grand scheme of things. Instead, he like all true servants of Christ, points people to Jesus.

He will baptize you with (or in) the Holy Spirit and fire. John only has the power to do the outward work of baptism. It is Jesus, God's own Son, who does the inward work that the baptism symbolizes. The "with fire" has been interpreted by commentators two quite different ways, with opinion seemingly about evenly divided. One possibility is related to verse 17 and the image of the snakes fleeing before the wildfire. It is one of destruction of those who do not repent. The other, quite different possibility is the one that looks forward to the day of Pentecost and the Holy Spirit coming visibly to the church in the form of tongues of fire. It could be either.

Luk 3:17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Luk 3:18 So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.