

Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ

The Beginning of the Ministry of John the Baptist

Last time...the childhood and youth of Jesus of Nazareth

This time...the ministry of John the Baptist begins

This morning we will be in

- Matt 3:1-6
- Mark 1:1-6
- Luke 3:1-6

We start in Luke 3

Luke 3:1-2

v1-2 Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate:

Luke, a historian respected by historians, gives us the historical timestamp of the beginning of the ministry of John the son of Zacharias aka the Baptist...

“In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar”...

the successor of Caesar Augustus

The Tale of Two Cities opens with the classic line,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

In the cities of Judea and Galilee...these were just the worst of times.

During the latter years of Augustus and spilling over into the early years of Tiberius, the Roman Empire was

- at its climax/zenith in terms of territory
- ripe with evil

In the hands of one man, first Augustus and now Tiberius, was absolute power

- Executive leader
- Commander-in-chief of the world’s most powerful army
- Head of the Senate...which was now mere “window dressing”
- High Priest...Caesar was being worshipped as a god, the only religion on which the State insisted

Rome absorbed/destroyed all nationalities and religions by “Hellenizing” them...with one exception: the Jews, who steadfastly resisted, having learned their idolatry lesson in captivity in Babylon

Q: Does a concentration of power like this lie in the future of this nation?

Half of the Empire's total population was slaves, treated with harsh, unspeakable cruelty

The typical free citizen was

- idle
 - mostly supported by the Empire vs working
 - devoted to self-indulgent sensual pleasure
 - consumed with any form of entertainment, sensual and violent
- disorderly (in God's eyes)...family in complete disarray
 - increasingly unmarried...failure of the institution of marriage
 - rampant homosexuality and other unnatural abominations
 - abortion and newborn murder was perfectly acceptable, even common
- immoral
 - "living-for-the-moment" and for himself
 - the worship of indecency (pandered to by the "arts")
- in despair...seeking comfort in the hyper-indulgence of all passions

Q: Does the citizenry of Rome sound like the citizenry of another nation?

Q: Do "Christians" in that nation look much different than the unbelievers?

Note: Presbyterians (USA) approved homosexual marriage this week

The life of a Jew at this time was particularly socially distressed, both politically and religiously

Political distress

Whereas a Jew was very safe in the Roman Empire under the reign of Augustus, he was despised and mocked by Tiberius

- persecution of the Jews in Rome started
- Rome took over the government of Judea...
and that government was harsh and merciless to the Jews

After Augustus banished Herod the Great's son, Archelaus, to Gaul, the provinces of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea were incorporated into the province of Syria, governed by Quirinius

Quirinius appointed Roman Procurators over the most troublesome province, Judea, and moved the seat of government from Jerusalem to Caesarea

Pontius Pilate was the 5th such Procurator...and he was a violent and cruel

- persecutor (vs protector) of his "subjects"
- thief
- murderer

Along with this relatively unknown man, Lysanias, Herod the Great's sons, Antipas and Philip, were appointed "fourth" governors (tetrarchs, sub-governors)

Antipas was much like his brother Archelaus and his father Herod

- cunning like a fox
- given over to the lusts of his flesh
- a builder...built the city of Tiberias in 22 AD
- ruined by his wife (wanted John's head on a platter)

Philip

- moderate and just, unlike his father and brothers
- built the city Caesarea Philippi on the Via Maris
- for his 37 year reign, the land was quiet and prosperous and the people content and happy

Religious distress

Herod the Great and then the succeeding Roman Procurators selected/appointed High Priests from among 4 powerful Jewish families...a control and revenue scheme by Rome

Annas or his son held the office of High Priest for much of that time until, by Pilate's appointment, Caiaphas, Annas' son-in-law, became High Priest

Yet Annas remained as Leader of the Sanhedrin and always had his fingers in the "High Priest pie"

The High Priests were

- not of the line of Aaron...therefore unrightful priests
- grossly self-indulgent
- morally indecent
- corrupt with the power and wealth of a State-run institution at its worst...using power to extract wealth from the people
- violently lorded over and scorned the Jewish people
- feared the Jewish people

The High Priests were a foretaste of the office of the Papacy in the Holy Roman Empire

- sold/purchased by powerful Italian families
- corrupt and self-indulgent and indecent
- lorded over the people vs serving as Christ did
- used power to extract wealth from the people

The political and religious leadership listed in these two verses were in power from the start of John the Baptist's ministry to the end of Jesus Christ's ministry...the corruption and abuse of power was a constant

Into this wretched foulness came John, the son of Zacharias
In the 15th year of Tiberius Caesar's reign (26AD), breaking a 400 year heavenly silence came the Forerunner of the Jewish Messiah...
who appears on the scene

- suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere
- shortly after the arrival of Pontius Pilate
- when Jewish Messianic expectation was at a fever pitch
- at the perfect time
- with a word from God

Matt 3:1-6

v1-2 In those days:

In what days?

The days given to us in Luke 3:1-2...of political and religious tyranny

came John the Baptist:

Who came?

John the Baptist

That is curious...why is he so called in the Gospel written to the Jews?

What did he come doing?

Preaching...picking up from Malachi and the promise of Elijah

A message that both resonated with and offended his hearers

- Repent
- The kingdom of heaven is at hand
- Prepare for that kingdom

Repent

The message of every prophet (none had been heard for 400 years)

A change of mind and direction for one's life

"Change your mind"...

- turn from your past ways and a corrupt mind
- turn with a renewed mind to the mind of Christ

As you "think", so you will act/live/walk

Man cannot walk into the kingdom of God on the path he is walking...independence, self-indulgence, away from God

Man must turn around and walk on God's path...in submission based on humility and agreement (Matt 7:13-14)

The Kingdom of heaven

Could a greater contrast be imagined by the Jews:

Life in the Roman Empire (Rome the undisputed master)

vs

the kingdom of God?

Not a doctrine hidden in OT but revealed in NT...

this kingdom was spoken of throughout the OT

The King of this kingdom would be the Lord Himself (Zech 14:9)

His kingdom would be known for its

- everlasting righteousness and holiness
- universality – over all nations of the earth
- permanency – forever (Dan 2, 7)

This kingdom was the great hope of Israel, who would be greater than all nations

Synonymous with the Rabbis were the terms

- Kingdom
- Kingdom of heaven
- Kingdom of God
- Kingdom of Jehovah

Out of fearful reverence for His Name, not wanting it to get too familiar, Matthew/Levi writing to the Jews opts for “kingdom of heaven”

The kingdom of heaven: the rule of heaven over earth

If Jesus Christ the Kok reigns in your heart now, you are in that kingdom already (Phil 3:20)

The Preparation

John the Baptist will point the Jews to their Messiah

The preparation is in their hearts, not in the halls of Gov’t

Ezk 14:1-8

The first step: Repentance

Where did he come preaching?

In the wilderness/desert of Judea...down where the Jordan River flows into the northern shore of the Dead Sea (Jericho-ish)

Would it not be more “logical” that the forerunner of the Messiah start his ministry in Jerusalem?

v3-4 he that was spoken of:

The Holy Spirit thru Matthew declaring to the Jews that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the prophesy in Is 40:3, quoted in this verse
The inspired voice boldly and loudly crying out for the Jews to prepare the way for the Lord is John the Baptist

And John the Baptist came...

- the last prophet...Luke 16:16
- looking like Elijah (promised in God's prior Word, Mal 4)
 - a Nazarite...uncut hair – NEVER has been cut
 - a simple mantle like Elijah's with a simple leather girdle/belt
 - not wearing the "official uniform" of the priesthood, representing man to God
 - not a pretty face wearing a \$5000 Armani suit like the modern-day false prophets on Christian TV
- eating like a kosher Euell Gibbons
 - locusts...4 kinds are clean per the dietary Law
 - wild honey
- alone...no record of a wife...ever

Prepare the way for the king:

Whenever a king came to visit a territory, the people worked feverishly to prepare for his coming.

Roads would be built, and those as level as possible to make easy the journey of the king, wanting his blessings and not his wrath

What road repair does your life need to get ready for the coming of Jesus Christ?

v5-6 Then went out to him...confessing their sins:

Who went out to see and hear John the Baptist out there in the desert?

- Jerusalem...many Jews of
- all Judea...many Jews from every town and village
- all the region round about...many Jews from all over the Jordan River Valley aka Rift Valley

Map 1: where John the Baptists' ministry started

Map 2: Jordan River headwaters (CP) and Golan Heights

Map 3: Profile of elevation

Map 4: Topographical Jordan River Valley

What was the appeal that all these people came to see and hear John?

"Our lives stink!

Who is this loud 'wild man' preaching out in the desert?

Could it be...time for the Messiah to come?!"

So they went...

- were baptized by him
- confessing their sins to God...agreeing with the word of God spoken

Circling back to several unanswered questions...

- Why did John start his ministry in the Jordan River Valley instead of in Jerusalem?
A lot of water was needed for his ministry
- Why was the son of Zacharias called John the Baptist?
Because he baptized people who heard and received his message
- Why is that so “remarkable”, especially to a Jewish audience?
Hold that thought for a moment

Luke 3:3-6

v3 the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins:
 John the Baptist’s loud, bold, and urgent preaching...
 in addition to
 a) Repent
 b) the kingdom of heaven is at hand
is for baptism of the believers of his message

This...baptism...is something new!

OT: ceremonial cleansing...

- symbolic
- often
 - daily for the priests
 - when person came to offer a sacrifice
- dipped in a mikvah (walk-in bathtub for communal use...
not really getting clean)

John’s baptism:

- spiritual
- once
- of repentance for the remission of sin
- of God (Matt 21:23-27)
- submersion in water (in his case, “living” water)

There is no such thing as baptism in OT...this is a new thing, hence

- John's moniker: John the Baptist
- part of the appeal that drew so many Jews to him

Never before had Jews been invited to be baptized in repentance for the remission of their personal sins

What John preached he "sealed" with an act of obedience with a brand new application to the Jews

Hence, the baptism of water was to reflect the mikvah of the heart, the cleansing bath of the heart

Note: The Jews did not baptize Gentile converts until after the birth of the Church...they imitated the Christians to compete with them

v4-6 As it is written in the book:

Here in Luke we have a larger quotation from Is 40

Is 40:3-5

John the voice is preparing the way for Who?

The LORD...Jehovah

Who is the Messiah John is going before?

The LORD!

Who is it all flesh shall see?

The LORD, the Messiah, the salvation of God

(Thus, no man born of woman is greater than John)

What is the salvation issue of the Jews...and of all mankind?

Sin

Sinful man's greatest need is the forgiveness of sin by the offended God

The blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ the LORD will accomplish man's greatest need

John the Baptist is the voice

- calling the Jews to repentance...to get right with God (agree with)
- preparing the way for the LORD...spiritually, a matter of the heart
- pointing the Jews to the LORD God their Messiah
- to prepare them for the Kingdom of God

Mark 1:1-6

The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus Christ as the Servant of God

v1 The beginning...Jesus...Son of God:

The Holy Spirit says this is the beginning of Jesus Christ's ministry
The Holy Spirit also declares Jesus Christ to be the Son of God

So...

- The Son of God is the Servant of God
- The Servant of God is the Son of God

v2-3 I send my...thy...thee:

Who are the parties in these two verses?

The voice = My messenger = John the Baptist

I = God the Father

Thy, Thee = Jesus Christ the Son of God

The LORD = Jesus Christ the Son of God and the Servant of God

Therefore,

- God the Father is sending His messenger John the Baptist to prepare the way for His Son and Servant Jesus...
Who is sent by the Father for the remission of sins
- The Father is speaking to the Son

The KJV, a translation of the Received Text, is more precise than all other English translations

thee = singular "you"

thine = singular "your"

ye = plural "you"

thy = plural "your"

v4-6 John did baptize:

The voice, God the Father's messenger, was sent to fulfill the ministry prophesied of Elijah in Mal 4...at the 1st Coming of the Son of God

There can be no forgiveness without the confession/agreement and repenting/turning from sin

John was sent to preach confession and repentance...

Jesus was sent to forgive sinners...you and me

Summary...the start of the ministry of John the Baptist, the Forerunner of the Messiah

Who came

Why he came

Where he came

How he came

His message rings every bit as true today as it did then:

- Repent
- The kingdom of heaven is at hand
- Preparation for that kingdom