

**THE PUBLIC MINISTRY OF JOHN THE BAPTIST*****John's Ministry Launched***

***3:1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,  
3:2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.***

Only the first phrase of verse 1 is necessary to establish the date (around 28/29 A.D. – Marshall, 133); the other information lists the rulers of the areas where Jesus worked and His influence was felt.

“John” or “Johanan” (meaning “God graciously gave” – Broadus, 32) was a popular name at the time; about four or five “Johns” appear in the NT alone (listed by Broadus, 32). In Matthew 3:1, John was designated as “the Baptist,” because baptism was such a prominent part of his ministry (Carson, 99).

***John's Person, Proclamation, and Baptism***

***3:3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;***

Mark 1: 6 adds, “John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.”

John the Baptist came in the wilderness in Judea (Mat. 3:1) around the district of the Jordan River (Mat. 3:5; Lk. 3:3). This was the land area in the lower Jordan valley just northwest of the Dead Sea. It was hot and arid, but not unpopulated (Carson, 99). The wilderness was commonly used for pasture land and sometimes had watchtowers and cities (Broadus, 33).

John's preaching aroused a great excitement among all the people. Matthew 3:5-6 (Mk. 1:4-5) states that all of Judea and those in Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized and confessing their sins. “All” of course is a hyperbole meaning that a very great many people went out to listen to him. Confession of sin was commanded in the law as everyone's responsibility when a wrong was done.

John's clothing was a coarse material made by weaving camel's hair. It was typically worn by the poor, but is most likely mentioned to establish links with Elijah (II Ki. 1:8), for John came in the spirit and power of Elijah (Lk. 1:17). In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as “a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.” Literally, he was “a possessor of hair” which probably refers to his clothing, not his person (Broadus, 38; Mal. 4:5; Lk. 1:17; Mat. 11:14). This was the typical garb of other prophets as well (Matt. 3:1; 11:8-9). In fact, this type of clothing was so typical for prophets that in Zechariah's day some men who were false prophets dressed like this in an attempt to deceive people (Zech. 13:4). Both John's words and his attire spoke to the people after 400 years of silence from God.

John's diet consisted of locusts and wild honey. Locusts are large grasshoppers which are allowed to be eaten by the Mosaic Law (Lev. 11:22). They were boiled, stewed, roasted, eaten fresh, or dried and

salted. Wild honey is just that, the honey of wild bees found among crevices in rocks, trees, or the like. Both suggest the diet of a man used to rough, wilderness living.

John's ministry involved (1) a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mk. 4:4; Lk. 3:3) and (2) preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand (Mat. 3:2).

Repentance is the summary statement of the content of John's message. Repentance signifies a change of thought, and so, a change of opinion and purpose. In general usage, the word did not necessarily involve grief; it was sometimes used by Greek writers of simply a change of judgment or opinion where there is no occasion for regret (Broadus, 33-34). However, in the NT, grief often accompanies repentance for it involves the recognition of one's sinful condition before God. Inward change naturally leads to an outward change of life expressed in conduct. Thus, at times, the prophets also called people to a proper outward change as well. As Carson says, repentance is "a radical transformation of the entire person, a fundamental turnaround involving mind and action and including overtones of grief which results in 'fruit keeping with repentance'" (Lk. 3:8; cf. Mat. 3:8 – Carson, 99). A Jewish scholar once said, "What is repentance? Repentance is that the sinner forsakes his sin, puts it out of his thoughts, and fully resolves in his mind that he will never do it again" (MacArthur, 65).

John was most known for his baptisms. The word translated as "baptize" means simply to immerse. This explains John's need to be by the Jordan River. Baptism symbolized the cleansing from sin. The mention of repentance shows this to be the case. Therefore, a baptism of repentance was a baptism which symbolized that a change of mind regarding the past and the future had taken place. John demanded that people repent, and acceptance of his baptism indicated that they had.

John's baptism is called "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The word translated as "for" in Greek indicates result and is connected with repentance, not baptism. In other words, baptism doesn't result in forgiveness for sin; rather, it is true repentance that results in forgiveness. Ezekiel said, "When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it" (Eze. 33:18-19). John's baptism, of course, is not the same as Christian baptism; his was an outward identification with the hope of the coming kingdom; Christian baptism is an outward identification with the Messianic King.

***3:4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.***

***3:5 'EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED, AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW; THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT, AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH;***

***3:6 AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.'"***

Repentance was needed because the King was coming (3:4) to bring salvation (3:6). "Throughout the OT there was a rising expectation of a divine visitation that would establish justice, crush opposition, and renew the very universe" (Carson, 99-100). When John and Jesus proclaimed the coming kingdom, there were, no doubt, profound misconceptions as to what that kingdom would look like, but it must be stressed that they were both preaching about the kingdom prophesied in the OT with its spiritual, economic, and political components, not simply a spiritual kingdom as some believe.

Luke 3:4-6 is a quotation of Isaiah 40:3-5. The imagery comes from the custom of filling potholes, and straightening and leveling roads prior to the coming of a king so that the king's ride into town would be smooth. In other words, the mission of John the Baptist is compared to an "Oriental courier who preceded his monarch to proclaim the king's coming and the need of the citizens to prepare the roads for his arrival" (Thomas, Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels*, 33, n. "v"). However, the coming of God is so much greater in magnitude than the coming of a king; the preparation is expressed in the metaphors of leveling mountains and valleys, not just potholes and bumps.

In Isaiah, the way for Yahweh is being made straight. In the gospels, the way is being made straight for Jesus. This sort of identification of Yahweh with Jesus is common in the NT (cf. Exo. 13:21 & I Cor. 10:4; Isa. 6:1 & Jn. 12:41; Ps. 68:18 & Eph. 4:8; Ps. 102:25-27 & Heb. 1:10-12). Although Jesus is only implicitly spoken of as God in these verses, John the Baptist was clearly announcing the great age in which God would dwell among men. Because the real preparation needed for the coming of the Lord was not road repair but heart repair, John preached of repentance for forgiveness of sin.

John's ministry fulfilled the predictions made of him. In Luke 1:17 when the angel appeared to Zacharias in the temple, he told him that his son, John, "will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." When John was born, Zacharias proclaimed, "you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS; to give to His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-78).

### ***John's Messages to the Multitudes, Tax Gatherers, and Soldiers***

***3:7 So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"***

Though John was baptizing people as a sign of repentance, not all who came to be baptized were truly inwardly repentant. Thus, John asked the question, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

John's words are harsh as he characterizes the people as "sons of snakes." Vipers are poisonous snakes, and the point of comparison is in their destructive nature. The OT makes a few references to the enemies of God as "vipers" (Isa. 59:5; Jer. 46:22; Isa. 14:29). In the writings of John (the apostle John, not John the Baptist) and in some extra-biblical literature at that time, Satan is referred to as a serpent. This could also be why he chose this figure of speech; their nature was more like Satan than like sons of Abraham (see Jn. 8:35, 44).

The wrath of God is His divine hostility against evil. The coming wrath that John is referring to is the time of judgment preceding Christ's second coming. The OT fixes this time at the beginning of "the Day of the Lord" and makes it a prelude to Messiah's reign (Isa. 3:16-24; 13:9-11; Jer. 30:7; Ezek. 38-39; Amos 5:18-19; Zech. 1:14-18; cf. Matt. 24:21; I Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Rev. 6:16-17). In OT prophetic thought the coming of Messiah to save and to judge were seen as one event. John didn't anticipate Messiah bringing salvation now and wrath at a later date. In fact, we might speculate that had Jesus been received by the nation as Messiah, the day of wrath would have come just as John was thinking.

**3:8 "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham.**

**3:9 "Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."**

The coming reign of God either demands repentance (Matt. 3:2) or brings judgment. Baptism alone was insufficient and repentance must be more than lip service. A great hindrance to true repentance was that the Jews assumed that regardless of their spiritual condition, they would enter the kingdom of God since they were descendants of Abraham. They reasoned that if they were a chosen nation, then the merits of their ancestors were enough. In the Midrash one Rabbi says, "In the age to come Abraham sits beside the gates of Gehenna and suffers no circumcised Israelite to go down" (Broadus, 47). Yet John was quick to correct their thinking. Physical relationships meant nothing, for God could change rocks into Abraham's descendants if He wanted to, just as He could cause them to praise His Son (Lk. 19:40). In this context, Piper explains that "Repentance is turning away from any and all reliance upon what I am by birth (like Jewish or Gentile) or what I have done by my own effort, and turning to the absolutely free mercy of God for the hope of salvation. Mercy by its very nature cannot be constrained or obligated by human distinctives or efforts . . . Repentance, therefore, is the altering of what we rely on in life, what we hope in, what we are counting on for salvation in the age to come and for help now. The repentance that leads to forgiveness of sins is turning away from what we are by birth or achieve by effort to rely wholly on mercy, God's free and sovereign grace" (sermon).

Although Israel was called the vineyard of God (Isa. 5:1-7), John says that any tree (any physical descendant) that didn't produce fruit (good works) would be cut down (judged by God) regardless of their roots (ancestry) and thrown into the fire (hell). It was a normal procedure for trees that did not bear fruit to be cut down to make room for trees that would. This was also God's normal procedure throughout Israel's history. God repeatedly judged the unbelieving in the nation, but saved a remnant (Ro. 11:1-5). These hypocritical leaders were no exception.

If John's hearers really wanted to escape the coming wrath, they needed to show the appropriate fruit (cf. Acts 26:20 [MacArthur has a lengthy discussion on repentance and fruit, 64-67]). True repentance bears fruit which can be seen by others. A right heart shows itself in proper behavior toward God and man. Examples of the fruit that John had in mind are listed in the verses that follow.

Though the tree had not yet been cut down, the time was short for the axe was already at its roots (see Isa. 10:33-34 and Jer. 46:22 for the idiom). Not only was the coming wrath near, but God was already beginning to discriminate among the people of Israel (this is as indicated by the present tenses "is cut" and "is thrown" – Broadus, 48). Every person was included. Judgment and the kingdom come hand in hand. To preach one is to preach the other.

**3:10 And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?"**

**3:11 And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise."**

**3:12 And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"**

**3:13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to."**

***3:14 Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."***

Examples of the fruit of repentance are seen in verses 11-14; these include acts of giving, honesty and justice.

Repentance is extremely practical. John doesn't demand that people demonstrate greater religious fervor, but that they treat fellow human beings well. As Garland puts it, "The repentance John called for did not require going to the temple to offer a sacrifice for sins, or fasting, or putting on sackcloth and ashes, or any other self-mortifying measures, nor did one have to withdraw to some desert hermitage. The divinely sanctioned way of repentance took one down by the Jordan instead of up to Jerusalem" (163). "When a person turns to rely on God's mercy. . . it is psychologically impossible to cherish the mercy God has shown to us and at the same time refuse to show it to another" (Piper, sermon).

Three examples of repentant behavior appear in the text.

Giving a garment to someone in need shows a concern for the proper treatment of fellow human beings. The fundamental ethic involves an unselfish approach to life. Refusing to meet the needs of others reveals a heart that is unrepentant.

After this general example given to the crowds, two specific groups of people come into focus: tax collectors and soldiers.

Taxation in the Roman government was fairly complex. There were different ranks of collectors and there were different taxes to collect. The Roman government stipulated the amount of tax to collect, but also gave the tax collector the right to add a surcharge over the tax to meet his personal expenses. Of course, human greed motivated the tax collectors to collect as high of a surcharge as possible.

The Jews reacted to Rome's taxation with extreme animosity; not only was their money being taken by a pagan society, but they were being charged unreasonable amounts by the tax collectors themselves. Therefore, tax collectors were seen as traitors to Judaism for they used a pagan system to fill their own pockets at the expense of their fellow countrymen; yet interestingly, these were the ones who truly desired to repent.

John's answer to the tax collectors was not that they should quit their jobs, but that they should conduct themselves honorably and fairly. John is not arguing against taxation; rather, he is condemning extortion, surcharges, kickbacks, payoffs, and bribes.

Another group of people who came forward were soldiers, who asked how they were to respond to John's call for repentance. John's reply came in the form of two prohibitions and one exhortation. First, they were not to intimidate anyone in order to extort money. Nor were they to use their position of authority for monetary advantage. Instead, they were to be content with their wages.

In sum, true repentance takes different forms in different circumstances, and in accordance with each individual's life situation. Although we may not be around the poor or have the ability to extort people, we need to demonstrate a repentant heart in our relationships with others.

God's ways do not change; after Jonah preached to Nineveh the Bible says, "God saw their works that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it." (Jonah 3:10). Nineveh brought forth fruit in keeping with repentance and was spared the wrath of God. The same could happen to the people to whom John spoke.