

*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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. 3 And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;*

This is such an important little section, such a wonderful introduction that we're going to take an entire morning to just look at what Luke gives us in these 3 first verses of Luke chapter 3.

Luke, of course, was selected by God to travel with Paul on his missionary endeavors all over the known world, all the way to Rome. Luke was Paul's physician, he was a doctor, and also a very careful historian. What a legacy.

And Luke is very familiar with the words of Jesus written by Matthew who pre-dates his history. Matthew records the tribute that Jesus himself said about John; Mt. 11:

*7 As these men were going away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 "But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who wear soft clothing are in kings' palaces! 9 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and one who is more than a prophet.*

*10 "This is the one about whom it is written,  
'BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,  
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.'*

*11 "Truly I say to you, among those born of women there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist!*

Now Luke will do what none of the other writers have done, and he is

going to introduce John in exactly the manner that many of the Jewish Old Testament writers introduced the prophets of old.

John is an Old Testament prophet, and not just a prophet, he is the greatest of all the prophets, so Luke begins his narrative about John very similar to how other Old Testament prophets are introduced.

*Isa. 1:1 The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

*Jer. 1:1 The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, 2 to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the exile of Jerusalem in the fifth month.*

*Ezekiel 1:1 Now it came about in the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, while I was by the river Chebar among the exiles, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God. 2 (On the fifth of the month in the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's exile, 3 the word of the LORD came expressly to Ezekiel the priest, son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and there the hand of the LORD came upon him.)*

*Daniel 1:1 In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. 2 The Lord gave Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the vessels of the house of God; and he brought them to the land of Shinar, to the house of his god, and he brought the vessels into the treasury of his god.*

*Amos 1:1 The words of Amos, who was among the shepherders from Tekoa, which he envisioned in visions concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam son of Joash, king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.*

Are you beginning to get a sense of what Luke is doing? John is greater than any of these greatest of God's prophets, and as such he deserves an introduction similar to how it would have been done if he had lived 400 to 750 years earlier.

Each of those introductions gives you a time stamp, and a window, a picture into what was happening historically. And that's what Luke is going to do to introduce this greatest and final old testament prophet.

Luke knew exactly what he was doing. His method is purposeful. John is equal to and greater than, all of the former prophets. Jesus told us so.

Now with that in mind, let's look at all of the names and time stamps associated with John, in order to paint a picture of the conditions present when God called His final prophet in old testament Israel.

*I 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 Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene,*

This will be somewhat of a history lesson, so bear with me. Every one of the names Luke gives, including the next verse, is a punch in the gut to Abraham's children. It's a slap in the face every time the children of David and Abraham remember the promises from God concerning their children

Because Israel has been waiting for the fulfilment of the promises, and things are getting worse, not better. And God has been giving them the silent treatment for over 400 years. No prophet in Israel, and the promises are moving farther out of reach . . . than ever.

God promised Abraham, real estate that encompasses all of the fertile crescent all the way out to the mediteranean sea. He promised a great nation that would be pre-eminent among all of the other nations. Israel would be boss among all other nations. Preeminence.

Israel's children would be like the sand of the seashore, the stars above. Un-numberable. And there would be a great throne in Israel. A great king, a son of David who would reign over Israel and indeed, since Israel was by God's decree, preeminent, a King over the whole earth.

But what has happened when Luke paints his portrait of the current state of Israel, like a state of the union address, is rather dismal compared to the promises. They have moved a million miles away from the promises, it seems.

There is no king in Israel. Just a bunch of petty monarchs who answer to the king of the whole earth, who dwells in Rome.

Instead of gaining real estate to include all that was promised to Abraham, the children of Israel have lost their claim on what little real estate they actually had in their best days, under king David.

Now they are an occupied land. Since the days when they were carted off to Babylon, there has been no king in Israel, and since that time, even though allowed by God to return, and rebuild their temple, they have had to pay taxes and tributes to foreign despots. Foreign occupiers who are idol worshippers.

Let's look at just a few of the names.

*I Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,*

That's an important time stamp. Tiberius was actually the son of Augustus wife by another marriage and adopted by Caesar Augustus. He then was forced to divorce his first wife who he loved, and was married to one of Augustus' daughters. And Caesar Augustus hated him. But what Augustus wanted ultimately was for his grandsons to reign as Caesar.

So he approached the Roman senate regarding a successor and that successor would be his adopted son, Tiberius. And the senate approved that, and here there is some confusion because Augustus reigned four more years after the fact of Tiberius having the title, and then he died.

So if you go back to the senates approval instead of when Augustus actually died and Tiberius had the power, it moves everything back about 4 years from our calendar and things fall in place much better.

If we look at it that way Jesus was born around 4 B.C. and it's now 26 AD. And that coincides better with other things, like the death of Herod-the-Great right at that time, and his kingdom getting split between his four sons.

Tiberius, from a jewish mindset, in spite of pax romana, roman peace, and a system of roads, and a freedom to travel anywhere in the known world under Roman rule without borders, to the jews, he was not only an occupier, but he was idolatrous.

Rome considered him a god to be worshipped. That was the position of Caesar. A god to be worshipped. And to the jews, that was heinous. He was a filthy idolatrous occupier as far as they were concerned.

Now Rome put kingdoms in place. Remember, a kingdom is an authority to reign. And Rome had petty under-kings, all over the place, to rule FOR Rome.

Herod the great was one of those. He was Idumean. Idumea was south of Jerusalem all the way to the borders of Egypt. So Herod the Great reigned from there all the way up into phoenicia.

When he died, at his wishes and Rome's allowance, the area was split between 3 sons. Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip.

They were all wicked idolatrous men. Philip was perhaps the best of the worst but had the least impact on the jews. He ruled east of the sea of galilee and north.

Antipas ruled east of the Jordan river and down into Edom. He's the one who had the palace where John the Baptizer would be locked up and eventually murdered. He also got the area of Galilee west of the Sea of Galilee north of Samaria. Important to Jesus and the disciples.

And Archelaus had the most impact on the Jews because he got most of the important areas to the Jews, Jerusalem and all the way up through Samaria.

Now Archelaus was excessively wicked and brutal and Rome deposed him by 6AD. And they replaced Archelaus with Roman governors the sixth of who was one Pontius Pilate.

And there's a fourth name which is troublesome, but not really. *and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene*

Lysanias is the only Texan in the list. Tetrach of Abilene. Tetrarch is another term for a petty king, a governor, and this region is just south and east of the bottom of the sea of Galilee. Where the cedars of Lebanon came from, north of Jerusalem.

The problem is that there were two petty kings named Lysanias who ruled in that same general area, and the more famous one is mentioned by Flavius Josephus, quite prominently as ruling in that region and being killed by Antony around 36BC.

So historians, who are always ready to discount the scriptural records, during the late 1700's and the 1800's all said, Luke made an egregious mistake here. Too bad. But we'll all believe Josephus over the Bible, right. So that proves the bible has errors.

Until an inscription in a temple is found, later, that puts another man named Lysanias in power over this region at exactly the time Luke mentions.

Always gotta jump to the conclusion you really want, that the Bible is full of errors, and of course Josephus couldn't make a mistake, so the people who would love to disprove the authority of this book jump the gun, and then. lo and behold, more information surfaces later, and we find out it's correct after all.

Why not just take the high road and say, this book is correct and free

from errors, even if for the moment there seems to be things we can't tie together. God will reveal that it was all correct in His time. And those attacks go on and on against the word of God, and they all eventually fail, and the veracity of God's book wins, over and over.

Of the four wicked petty kings mentioned, two will have a larger impact on our story. Obviously. Herod Antipas who will imprison God's Holy Prophet, John, and who will make wicked promises while he's enticed by lewdness, and ultimately, John's head will roll.

And of course Pontius Pilate is synonymous with the murder of Jesus. He's trapped and about to be replaced by petty governor number seven if one more riot occurs under his rulership, so in order to save his own skin, Jesus will have to be turned over to the jews to do with Him as they please. And Jesus is murdered while Pilate looks helplessly the other way.

Luke is painting for us a dismal picture of the state of the nation, as it were, in our terms, in Israel when John received the Word from God and began his ministry.

Wickedness. Idolatry. Occupation. Oppression. Hopelessness while you hand over your taxes to vile rulers.

We conservatives hate paying taxes to a government that we know good and well is using our dollars to murder babies in the womb. We hate that.

Think how much the jews hated handing over their money to a bunch of idol worshippers who were oppressing them and occupying the real estate God had said would be theirs.

It was a dark time in Israel. And it's about to get darker;  
*vs. 2 in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,*

That should send up a red flag immediately. Because the Levitical priesthood was only to have one high priest, chosen by the other priests. And that's what they did, until now.

Rome exerted its power into religion by getting in the middle of the high priesthood. Rome had the ultimate choice of who would be high priest, and obviously, politics being politics the person who could stroke Rome, get along with Rome, do what Rome desired, that would be the high priest.

During this time, being from the tribe of Levi didn't even matter. And Rome had their man, and they liked him so much, he was in control of the priesthood for years and years longer than what should have been.

That was Annas. A vile base greedy sell out to Rome. And in order to turn the office over from time to time, Annas had 6 sons who were all puppet high priest while he was in control, and a 7th, one Caiaphas was a son-in-law to Annas.

All of those men got filthy rich being high priest. Here's how. They turned the temple into a for profit lucrative business and controlled everyone who sold things there.

All Israel had to pay a temple tax. And the normal money that was in circulation had whose image on it? This is a Bible question. Jesus asked this. Whose image is this? Caesar.

So the Jews considered that money to be idolatrous and you could not pay your temple tax with the usual money in circulation. That meant you had to purchase Jewish coins, orthodox money from money changers. And their rate, the exchange rate was extortion.

Remember what Jesus did with those guys? Two times. This is also a Bible quiz question. Right, He drove them out of the temple grounds with a whip, after He turned their money tables over.

Those money changers were Annas and Caiaphas Inc. They extorted from the folks from out of town, out of country, and a percentage of the extortion made it back to the bosses. Annas and Caiaphas. They were like mob bosses in organized crime.

And they had another extortion going on. You'd choose an animal to slaughter from your herd, the best and most perfect, and bring it for the sacrifice, and Annas & Caiaphas Inc had a little inspection scheme going on.

They would find a defect with your animal and you would then be forced to purchase an animal for sacrifice from . . . them . . . at, you guessed it, an extorted price. Jesus called the temple a den of thieves, and that's exactly what Annas and Caiaphas Inc. was. They could care less about acceptable worship. They were getting filthy rich.

And they were at the leading edge of religion in Israel. The top religious men. Corrupt, base, vile men, at the head, and the rest below them were for the most part, also corrupt. Religion in Israel was in a dark time. Fully corrupt.

Going through the motions, while Rome looked on approvingly, and religion in Israel was all about keeping silly rules most of which were not in the scripture, they were sub scriptural traditions. Everything of any meaning written in Moses law was set aside. The deeper things like holiness and justice.

And into that scene of frightening darkness, away from the religious hub, or any other hub, in the middle of the dry desert wilderness God commissions a prophet who will be the fore-runner to His Son, the Lord, Jesus Christ.

*the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness.*

In this case, the word is not a new revelation. John didn't receive prophetic visions of the future. Things before this word unknown. It's an old message that John has received and the word from God that the time is now to preach it.

It was a call to begin his preaching ministry. He knows from other prophecy, his father, and the angel Gabriel, that he is to be the one to make ready a people for the Lord, the messiah.

We don't know the exact word from God that John received. But we do know what it was not. God did not tell John to go to Jerusalem and present himself to the elders of Israel, the religious and civil top dogs. That's not what we see.

What we learn instead is that the people, the common people of Israel are starved for anything, any morsel from God that might be real. It's been 400+ years since God spoke through a prophet. And the religious system in their land is bankrupt.

How far would you walk for a drop of water if you were parched? Ok, spiritually then, how far to see and hear a real prophet who has a direct connection with God?

And that's what happened. Matthew records some of the details for us; Mt. 3:1 *Now in those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, 2 “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*

*3 For this is the one referred to by Isaiah the prophet when he said, “THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT!’”*

*4 Now John himself had a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then Jerusalem was going out to him, and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan; 6 and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they confessed their sins.*

He didn't go to Jerusalem, Jerusalem and all Judea and all the surrounding districts went out to the wilderness to see and hear John. It was like a grass roots movement. Something real. The first prophet in over 400 years. You go out to see him, not vice-versa.

And his message is the same as the one Jesus will preach, and it has been preached throughout the old testament from the beginning of time. It's a universal message; God forgives sin for those who repent. God

forgives sin for those who repent.

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

God offered forgiveness with repentance in old testament times. It's as ancient a concept as sin itself.

*Isaiah 1:18 "Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson, they will become like wool.*

*Isaiah 55:7*

*Let the wicked man forsake his own way and the unrighteous man his own thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that He may have compassion, and to our God, for He will freely pardon.*

*Ezekiel 18:27*

*But if a wicked man turns from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he will save his life.*

There's nothing new here. John's message is the same old message. But let's think a little deeper on this.

Can God just forgive sin and be a just God? Can He just declare sin gone. Look the other way. Forgive with no cost, no justice? What did He tell Moses? Exodus 34

*6 Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; 7 who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished . . .*

A righteous God, a just God must punish the affront of sin. Sin is a challenge to authority and ownership. It cannot go unpunished, if God is a just God.

Therefore, throughout the old testament, repentance brings forgiveness of sin, but those sins still need to be punished for justice to take place. Animals would shed blood continually for 4000 years, to make atonement, payment, for sins.

And yet the writer of Hebrews tells us 10:4 . . . *it is impossible for the blood of bulls and of goats to take away sins.*

Sin can be forgiven, but only atoned one way, with the blood of Jesus. The blood of a sinless sacrifice. It's a trade. He gives me His righteousness, He takes my sin. Atonement is made with His blood on the cross. Once for all time. Once for all sins.

Still, John came preaching forgiveness through repentance, even though the blood that would wash away the sins once for all was yet future. It was always future throughout the old testament, and for us it's always past, as either side of the cross looks to that one act that justified and made full atonement for sin.

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

Repentance. We've talked about repentance before. What is real repentance? And I always like to explain it in terms of two warring factions, because I think the concept is largely mis-understood.

When I see the blue and red light behind me and I pull over and the officer says, you were going way too fast, what do I say? I'm sorry officer.

And then when he does a u-turn and goes the opposite direction, I get under way, and if I'm not more careful, soon I'm going the same speed as before. But I said I was sorry, right. Yeah, that's worthless.

Repentance has a component in it of actually changing direction. Change. We all hate that word. We all love our sins. We really don't want to change.

Back to our warring factions. Two people lobbing rockets at each other, but one is all-powerful, you can't win this war. So a meeting is arranged. And you tell the all-powerful, I want peace, but here's the deal, I'm going to go right back and continue lobbing rockets at you and yours. But I want forgiveness.

And that's what the church is selling these days. It's the final stanza to "Just as I am" I want you to forgive me, but I'm going to keep doing "Just as I please." Take me just as I am, because I've got no desire to change.

Repentance is when the all-powerful offers terms of peace but to have that peace, you need to leave the old army behind, and join forces with the all-powerful opponent.

We need to come out of this rebellious warring world and give our all, our total being, to the other side. We leave Satan's rebellion and join forces with Jesus Christ. And that involves real change. Leaving the sins of our old life, behind. A willingness, we can't actually do it, He has to help, but we have to at least have the will, be willing to leave our old life of sin.

That's the repentance John is preaching.

When the other adulterers dragged the woman caught in adultery to Jesus and demanded that she be stoned according to Moses law, and Jesus said, OK, let the one without sin cast the first stone, and they all filed out of the room, what did He say to the woman? You're free to go? Your sins are forgiven?

No, He said where are your condemners? And she said they're all gone. And He said "neither do I condemn you". Was that the end of the story?

No, no, not quite. Neither do I condemn you, go now, and sin no more. That's repentance. Leave that adulterous life style.

Paul says famously after one of his long lists of people who will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, big long list of every kind of sin

conceivable, and then Paul says; Such were some of you. But, you were washed. Those sins, those lifestyles of rebellion against God, are either in the past tense, or you're in the group that isn't washed.

Repentance doesn't save you. That would be works righteousness. But repentance is a window inside of a heart that is broken over the sin and rebellion against God, and a willingness to walk away from sin, and towards righteousness.

That's real repentance, and that's what John came preaching.

And then it tells us, John was doing something unique to the Jews. Baptism. He was dunking the repenters in water. Jews didn't do that. Except in one case.

Proselytes from other places outside Judaism who wanted to be right with the God of Gods, went through this rite of baptism to indicate they were cleansed of their old life and beginning anew.

It was radical that John was saying to the Jews of that day, you're like Gentiles. You don't have a clue. Your religion is bankrupt. You need to start over, like the Gentile proselyte's and be baptized into real Judaism.

John came preaching real sin and real forgiveness and real righteousness, a cleansing before God, a promise to walk away from the old sins and begin anew, with God.

It was radically different from the bean counter traditions of the Pharisees. 9 peas for me, one pea for God. And if there's too many steps to the outhouse, just hold it in until Sabbath is over. Silly rules.

Rediculous traditions that were all for show, while the real sin, deep inside, is ignored. Jesus called them white washed sepulchres. White and clean on the outside, but full of rotting death on the inside.

John appears at the darkest time in Israel, to announce the dawn. But the dawn and the promises are impossible in a land so far removed from its God.

John came preaching a real repentance, a disowning of the empty religiosity, a square face to face encounter with sin, an understanding that keeping silly rituals and talking non stop about what can and cannot be done that might break the sabbath while you ignore the real deep seated sins, is spiritual bankruptcy.

Next week we'll look at John's first sermon. Just in case you think I'm abrasive. Wait until you hear John preach.

Meanwhile, ask yourself the same questions John's message addressed. Have you repented of this world and it's sin? Have you stopped lobbing rockets at the Creator and joined forces with Him. Come out of this world's rebellion and become a son in His authority to reign.

That's what John was preaching, and that has been God's message since sin entered the world. We can't do it alone. But it has to be done. He will help you, if the willingness to be seperated from sin is at least present.