

Luke 3 • The Voice in the Wilderness

Introduction

The person and character of Elijah is replayed over and over throughout history beginning with the first Elijah, continuing through John the Baptist, and on to a final fulfillment yet to come. What was his role? What exactly is the work he undertakes? And more importantly, how does it relate to us? We know that one aspect of salvation has to do with God's calling, but another aspect involves a necessary preparation to receive the Savior. We may find that John's ministry was not unique and isolated to him alone, but may be a kind of example of how we're to view our own role in bringing others to Christ. As at Lazarus' tomb before Christ raised him from the dead, someone had to roll away the stone – remove the obstacle – so he could hear Christ's voice.

¹Now 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, ²in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. ³And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; ⁴as 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.
⁵EVERY RAVINE WILL BE FILLED,
AND EVERY MOUNTAIN AND HILL WILL BE BROUGHT LOW;
THE CROOKED WILL BECOME STRAIGHT,
AND THE ROUGH ROADS SMOOTH;
⁶AND ALL FLESH WILL SEE THE SALVATION OF GOD.’”

[Read v.1-6]

Q: How does John's choice of location, “in the wilderness”, speak of the spiritual goals of his ministry?

A: Throughout Scripture the physical wilderness represents the typology of a spiritual wilderness. Spiritually, the people were in a wilderness, separated from God by their sin and disobedience.

Q: Not just a prophet, but one about whom it was prophesied, how would you characterize Isaiah's description of John's ministry? How would you describe John?

A: He's a road builder who gets everything ready for the arrival of the King. There's a lot of “religious debris” which must be removed so that they can welcome the Messiah.

Point: *What has to be made straight, filled in, brought low, made smooth, etc. are the imperfections in one's faithfulness.*

Q: Is there a difference between the baptism of John's ministry and the kind of Christian baptism practiced today?

A: The focus of John's baptism was to look forward to the coming of the Savior.

It happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the upper country and came to Ephesus, and found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John's baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus.” When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Acts 19:1-5

The focus of baptism now is more of a looking back to identify with Christ's death, burial, and resurrection.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if

we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin;

Romans 6:1-6

Point: In either case, the common denominator is a baptism of repentance, a permanent change in behavior going forward where sin is concerned. The road builder through the spiritual wilderness is removing the obstacles of sin to make way for the arrival of the King.

⁷So 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? ⁸Therefore 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. ⁹Indeed 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.”

[Read v.7-9]

Q: For the people of his day, what image might they draw from John’s words? Whereas the previous verses depict him as a road builder, what occupation might be depicted here?

A: It’s that of a farmer who is chopping down a fruitless tree and watching snakes flee from a burning field. These are the kinds of things a farmer did to prepare bad ground for good use.

Q: What is the greater spiritual meaning behind calling someone a “brood of vipers”?

A: Ever since Eden, the serpent has represented Satan throughout Scripture. It’s a dramatic way of stating that the people’s present lifestyle identifies them more as children of Satan than children of God through Abraham.

Q: What is the key phrase here that harkens to the theme of baptism and what is the real, visible proof of it?

A: “...bear fruits in keeping with repentance”. It is proven only in a heart changed to the degree that behavior is changed, a life producing results for God’s kingdom based on sincere repentance of sin.

Point: John preceded Jesus because the preaching of the judgment of sin must always come before the declaration of saving grace. First comes conviction, then comes conversion.

¹⁰And the crowds were questioning him, saying, “Then what shall we do?”

¹¹And 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.”

¹²And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”

¹³And he said to them, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.”

¹⁴Some 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.”

[Read v.10-14]

Q: What occupation might these verses describe based on John’s actions on a personal level with those who approached him?

A: Counselor. John didn’t simply baptize people en masse, but personally prepared them to ensure that they truly lived a changed and faithful life going forward.

Q: Why do you suppose John began by admonishing them to be generous to one another? Shouldn’t he have begun with their personal commitment to God?

A: Throughout the Old Testament, whenever God spoke through the prophets (and John is the last of the Old Testament prophets), God nearly always began proving the people’s unfaithfulness to Him by their unfaithfulness to each other. The proof of obedience to the first 4 commandments to love God with all one’s heart is the visible proof of obedience to the last 6 commandments to love one’s neighbor.

[Continued on the next page.]

Q: How would you characterize John's instructions when it came to their specific vocations?

A: John never condemned a profession, but encouraged doing the job honestly and treating people fairly. In other words, to pursue one's profession in obedience to God's Word and ways.

Point: John asks for obedience to the Law which they already knew; he never requires obedience to something new, out of reach, or supernatural. They didn't need to change anything except to cease transgressing what they already knew.

[Read v.15-18, 21-22]

¹⁵Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Christ, ¹⁶John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

¹⁸So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people.

²¹Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, ²²and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

Q: How might we now characterize John? What role is he now primarily playing?

A: Witness. John didn't come to talk about himself but to bear witness to the Son of God.

Q: What is the difference between the baptism of the Spirit and the baptism of fire?

A: The baptism of the Spirit takes place when the sinner trust Christ and becomes a part of the church, the body of Christ.

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:13

The baptism of fire pertains to judgment as made clear in v.9 and 17. Harvesting is a familiar Scriptural picture of judgment.

*The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.*

Psalms 1:4

*Let the nations be aroused
And come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat,
For there I will sit to judge
All the surrounding nations.
Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe.
Come, tread, for the wine press is full;
The vats overflow, for their wickedness is great.*

Joel 3:12-13

Q: John baptized Jesus in order to introduce Him to the people. Who else were witnesses that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah?

A: Both God the Father and God the Spirit.

Q: How did this baptism foreshadow a future baptism of Christ?

A: It foreshadowed His suffering on the cross.

"But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!

Luke 12:50

As explained in Matthew's account of Christ's baptism, it was through death, burial, and resurrection that He "fulfilled all righteousness".

But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him.

Matthew 3:15

Q: What is the one unique feature of Jesus' baptism which only Luke reports?

A: That Jesus prayed during His baptism. (v.21)

Point: *If the perfect Son of Man had to pray in order to serve the Father, what is the example to us?*

¹⁹But when Herod the tetrarch was reprimanded by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the wicked things which Herod had done, ²⁰Herod also added this to them all: he locked John up in prison.

[Read v.19-20]

Q: How would you characterize John's final role?

A: Martyr. He does not compromise the message to save his life but remains a faithful witness of the truth without fear or favor.

Overall Application

Discuss the following as it applies to yourself from this lesson:

- *What should your role be as a road builder for Christ?*
- *What should your role be as a farmer preparing the fields for Christ?*
- *What should your role be as a counselor to seekers for Christ?*
- *What should your role be as a witness for Christ?*
- *What if you should be placed in the position to be a martyr for Christ?*

How do these attributes speak to your own ministry and witness? What might need to be changed, strengthened, or enhanced?