



## Jesus: A Life: Week 2

### Jesus' Baptism

Bid Idea: Jesus comes as the Son of God, empowered by the Spirit of God, to accomplish what we cannot.

Read the Bible:

Luke 3

Matthew 3:13-17

### **STUDY**

\*\*\* Before interacting with this guide, all leaders should study the referenced texts using the HEAR Method. It's also important to encourage your group members to read the text using the HEAR Method. \*\*\*

H: Highlight, or take note of, things in the passage that stick out to you as you read.

E: Explain what the passage means by asking simple questions of the text:

- **Why was this written?**
- **To whom was it originally written?**
- **How does it fit with the verses before and after it?**
- **Why did the Holy Spirit include this passage in the book?**
- **What is He intending to communicate through this text?**

A: Apply the text to your life. What does God want you to learn from this text?

R: Respond to God in prayer.



## **Summary**

John the Baptist burst on the scene, literally out of nowhere. He wasn't preaching in a big church with nice comfy pews and AC. He didn't even have a building. Instead, he was preaching in the wilderness. Moreover, he wasn't preaching a message that was particularly easy to hear. This was no feel good, go get em' tiger, message. John's message was clear. "Repent." Turn or burn. Get right. Why? Because the King is coming. Despite less-than-ideal listening conditions and a message that was hard to hear, John was drawing massive crowds.

John's purpose was clear and from God. He was to prepare the way for the Messiah who was coming. This is why John's message of repentance was so important. The only way for someone to be ready for the arrival of Jesus is for them to turn away from their sin. No one is ready for Jesus who doesn't see their sin as a major problem. So, John preached repentance. Day after day he preached. After he preached, he would baptize those who were ready to repent of their sin and turn to God. This was the way John's ministry moved along until one day a surprise baptism candidate changed everything.

Imagine the scene, person after person is being dunked. Then, the line just stops. The baptisms stop. John the Baptist refuses to dunk the next person. Why? Because John recognizes that the Messiah is before him. He cannot baptize Jesus. Jesus has no need to repent. Instead, Jesus should baptize him. Jesus insists, he must be baptized, "to fulfill all righteousness."

What an odd statement. How is Jesus' baptism a fulfillment of righteousness? In order to understand what Jesus means by this we must remember his purpose. Jesus is here to save sinners and to give us righteousness that we don't have on our own. This means that Jesus wasn't fulfilling his righteousness, he is fulfilling ours. He is being baptized in our place in obedience.

Ever wonder how the thief on the cross got away with not being baptized? He still made it to heaven, but he was never baptized. He died before he was obedient to the Lord in baptism. Jesus' baptism is why he still got to heaven. Where the thief failed in obedience, Jesus succeeded. Likewise, where we fail, Jesus succeeds.

John consents. He baptizes Christ, and then the Holy Spirit descends from heaven and rests on Christ. A voice calls out calling Christ, "my beloved Son." This is it. Now Jesus'



ministry has begun. Christ's baptism is the starting line for everything that follows in the book of Luke.



## **Leading Your Group**

**Community Time – Start group by asking for Prayer requests and checking in on everyone.**

### **Bible Study**

\*\*\*Have everyone in your group read assigned scripture before meeting.\*\*\*

**Start Group by Reading Luke 3:1-21 (Split the Reading among the Group)**

**Major Lessons – (These are the “Lesson Points” in Class)**

#### **1. Repentance is necessary to follow Jesus.**

John comes to prepare the way for Jesus. The way he did that was by pointing people to repent of their sins.

IF WE WANT TO BE REAL CHRISTIANS, REPENTANCE IS NOT OPTIONAL

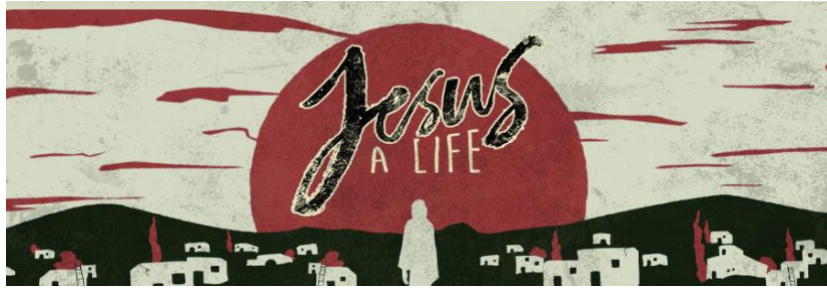
Repent: 1.) feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin. 2.) Turn away

**When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said “Repent,” he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.**

**- Martin Luther**

#### **2. Jesus’ is perfectly obedient in our place.**

Why would Jesus be coming to be baptized for a forgiveness of sin? He was sinless. The answer is simple. Jesus is performing the acts of righteousness that we need.



The Gospel is simple: Gospel= JESUS IN MY PLACE.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. The baptism reminds us that God is Trinity.**

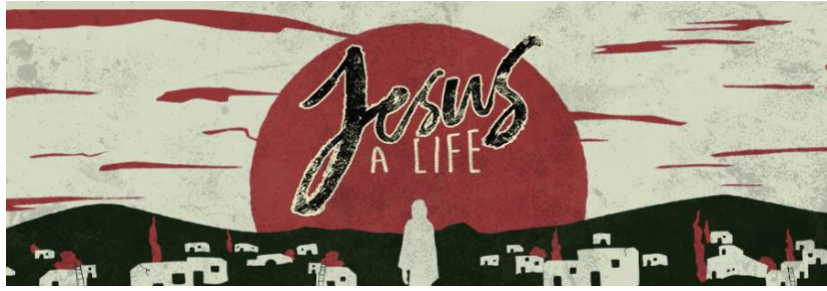
If you go and look for the word trinity in the scriptures, you will not find it. However, you will find the Trinity. Nowhere is the trinity more obvious than in the baptism of Jesus. God the Father affirms God the Son. God the Spirit rests on God the son. God the Son is baptized in our place.

**Discuss** (The following questions are meant as suggested questions to guide conversation.)

1. Why is repentance so important to Christians?
2. What does it mean that God is Trinity?
3. How does Jesus being baptized in our place preview the rest of his ministry?
4. Are there any other passages that show us the Trinity in such a a profound way?

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<sup>1</sup> Made popular by J.D. Greear



## **Resources**

### **Expositor's Bible Commentary**

**1** The dating provided in this verse was more immediately useful to Luke's first-century readers than to the average reader today who does not know the period when Luke was writing. If the reign of Tiberius was dated from the occasion of his predecessor's death (Augustus died on 19 August A.D. 14), his "fifteenth year" would be from August, A.D. 28, to August, A.D. 29, according to the normal Roman method of reckoning. If Luke was following the Syrian method as a native of Antioch, Tiberius's "fifteenth year" would have been from the fall of A.D. 27 to the fall of A.D. 28 (cf. discussion in Notes). For Luke to use the Roman method would have been in keeping with his cultural environment and appropriate for his readers.

"Herod" is Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great who ruled Galilee and Perea 4 B.C.–A.D. 39 (cf. Luke 3:19–20; 13:31; 23:7). Philip, like Herod Antipas, was a son of Herod the Great. He ruled a group of territories to the northeast of Palestine Iturea and Tracónitis (4 B.C.–A.D. 33/34). Lysanias, unlike an earlier ruler of that same name, is unknown except through inscriptions (see Creed, pp. 307–9). Pontius Pilate was governor (Luke uses the general term *hēgemoneuontos*, not the disputed "procurator") from A.D. 26–36 (cf. F.F. Bruce, "Procurator," NBD, 2d ed., pp. 973–74)

**2** The official high priesthood of Annas had ended in A.D. 15, but his influence was so great, especially during the high priesthood of his son-in-law Caiaphas (A.D. 18–36) (cf. John 18:13), that his name is naturally mentioned along with that of Caiaphas. With the reference to the high priests, we move from the secular world to the religious and are ready for the introduction of the prophet John. He is in the desert, where he had gone (1:80). The desert held memories for the Jews as the locale of the post-Exodus wanderings of Israel. It also had eschatological associations (cf. not only Isa 40:3 but also Hos 2:14). Some thought demons inhabited the desert, and it was later alleged that John had a demon (Matt 11:18). Luke's interest is not only in the coming of John (Matt 3:1, Mark 1:4: "John came") but in the message "the word of God came" (cf. Notes).

**3** The impression Luke, more than the other Gospels, gives is that John had an itinerant ministry. Apparently he not only preached in the wilderness but followed the Dead Sea coast to the Jordan River and then away a distance from there. The "desert" is a barren rocky area that



covers a large territory. Naturally he went where there was enough water to perform baptisms (see John 3:23).

John's baptism was "of repentance" (*metanoias*), that is, its chief characteristic was that it indicated sorrow for sin and a moral change on the part of those he baptized (vv. 8–14). The noun *metanoia* ("repentance") appears also in 3:8; 5:32, 15:7; and 24:47. The verb *metanoēō* ("repent") occurs in Luke 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; 16:30; and 17:3–4. The basic idea comes from the Hebrew *šûb* ("turn," i.e., from sin to God; cf. TDNT, 4:975–1008). Repentance is an ancient prophetic theme (e.g., Ezek 18:21, 30). "For [*eis*, or 'with a view to'] forgiveness of sins" expresses the result of the repentance shown in baptism.

**4–6** Isaiah 40:3 was used by the community at Qumran as a rationale for leading a separated life in the desert, where they believed they were preparing the way of the Lord by means of a constant reading of the Law (1QS 8.12–16; 9.19–20). For Luke, as for Matthew and Mark, the Isaiah passage was a clear prophecy of the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke includes more of the quotation than Matthew and Mark do. First he cites the extraordinary way in which, on the analogy of preparations made for a royal visitor, even the seemingly immovable must be removed to make way for the Lord (vv. 4–5). What needs removal is the sin of the people.

Luke concludes the Isaiah quotation with words that aptly describe his own evangelistic and theological conviction: "And all mankind will see God's salvation" (v. 6). Luke finds here, following the LXX, a biblical basis for his own universal concern and his central theme of salvation (Morris, *Luke*, p. 95). The words concerning the appearance of God's glory (Isa 40:5) are omitted. Luke does stress the glory of God often elsewhere, beginning with 2:14; but for some reason he apparently does not think it appropriate to stress it here.

**7** The word "crowds" represents *ochlos*, an assorted group of people, rather than *laos* (cf. v. 18). Luke does not specify who was in this group (Matt 3:7 says that they were Pharisees and Sadducees; cf. John 1:19, 24). Perhaps Luke wants to leave the first narration of a specific confrontation with the Pharisees till they have one with Jesus himself (5:17). Similarly, no mention is made of people coming from Jerusalem (cf. Mark 1:5).

John's language is strong, as was that of OT prophets who preceded him. His words (vv. 7–9) are virtually identical with those in Matthew 3:7–10. Luke has, however, omitted one element and added another. Matthew's reference to John's words "Repent, for the kingdom is near" (Matt 3:2) is not found anywhere in Luke's account. Although Luke does emphasize the kingdom, he reserves its introduction for Jesus (4:43). What he adds here is a list of specific instances in which his audience ought to exhibit behavioral changes consistent with repentance.



Later on Jesus himself used the epithet “brood of vipers” against the Pharisees (Matt 23:33). Here John uses it as a prophet of judgment under the direction of God’s Spirit. OT prophets had spoken strongly also and made similar allusions to reptiles (Isa 59:5). The question “Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” suggests that while their “coming out to be baptized by him” was the proper thing to do, their motives were in question.

**8–9** The language is picturesque. Two images are presented. First, a tree that does not produce fruit should be chopped down and removed to make way for one that will. Jesus speaks later about appropriate fruit (6:43–45) and also tells a parable about cutting down a barren fruit tree (13:6–9). The imagery may be intended to call to mind the figure of Israel as a fig tree or vine (cf. Isa 5:17). Black, p. 145, suggests a possible wordplay in the original Aramaic that would have included *raq* and *qar* (twice) in the words for “flee,” “root,” and “cut down.” The second image, the axe “at the root” symbolizes an impending radical action, the destruction of the whole tree. The theme of Abraham’s children (v. 8) is found in John 8:31–41, Romans 4:12–17, and Galatians 3:6–9.

Mere physical descent from Abraham is not important; God can create his own children out of stones just as he can cause inanimate stones to praise his Son, if humans remain silent (19:40). The threat of judgment is heightened through the imagery of fire, a theme reintroduced in the reference to Jesus’ ministry (vv. 16–17).

**10–11** This prophetic word of judgment elicits a response, first from the crowd in general (v. 10), then from the unpopular and greedy tax collectors (v. 12), and finally from the soldiers (v. 14). The conversations, which are unique to Luke, provide opportunity for some clear statements about social justice and responsibility.

The crowd, which is mixed, in contrast to the groups of tax collectors and soldiers (vv. 12, 14), is told to share clothing and food with the needy (v. 11). John is not requiring a strict communal life like that at Qumran but “fruit in keeping with repentance” (v. 8; cf. Gal 5:22–23). The “tunic” was the short garment (*chitōn*) worn under the longer robe (*himation*). One might have an extra tunic, for warmth or a change of clothes (cf. 9:3: “Take ... no extra tunic”). Those who had broken the biblical law of love needed to demonstrate their repentance in this kind of sharing.

**12–13** The “tax collectors” (v. 12) were part of a despised system (cf. 5:27; 15:1). Of the three groups, they would have been considered most in need of repentance. The chief tax collectors (*architelōnēs*), such as Zacchaeus (19:2), bid money for their position. Their profit came from collecting more than they paid the Romans. The chief tax collectors hired other tax collectors to work for them. Because their work and associations rendered them ritually unclean and





because they regularly extorted money, they were alienated from Jewish society and linked with “sinners.” While John shows social concern, he does not advocate overthrow of the system but rather advocates a reform of the abuses. Since these abuses arose out of individual greed, a radical change in the practice of the collectors themselves was required (v. 13).

**14** The “soldiers” (*strateuomenoi*) were probably not Roman but Jewish, assigned to internal affairs (cf. comment on “officers” at 22:4). The very nature of their work gave them opportunity to commit the sins specified. Soldiers could use threats of reprisal to extort money from the people. The soldiers’ question suggests the seriousness of their moral need, by means of the added words *kai hemeis* (“even we”)—“What about us?” as JB puts it. Here again the need of others is set over against personal greed. The second great commandment (cf. 10:27b) needs to be applied.

**15–17** The question naturally came to the minds of “the people” (v. 15; cf. v. 18) whether such a radical prophet as John might be the Messiah. In John 1:19–25 popular opinion about him is reported in greater detail. Here John answers the unexpressed question in several ways. The Messiah is “more powerful” than he is (v. 16). The Messiah is worthy of such reverence that even the task of tying his sandals is more than John feels worthy of (cf. John 3:30).

The Messiah will baptize, not with water in a preparatory way, as John had done, but actually “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (v. 16). These are not two separate categories of baptism. The single word “with” (*en*) combines the two (cf. Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8). The coming of the Spirit is to have the effect of fire. John uses an agricultural image to explain this. The grain is tossed in the air with a “winnowing fork” (v. 17). The lighter and heavier elements are thus separated, the heavier grain falling on the “threshing floor.” The “chaff,” which is not the true grain, is burned up and the wheat stored in the barn.

Interpreters have discussed whether the fiery work of the Spirit is judgment or purification also. Modern readers find it difficult to understand how the concepts of the Spirit, baptism (usually associated with water), and fire relate to one another. The biblical background (e.g., Isa 44:3; Ezek 36:25–27; Joel 2:28–29) and also 1QS 4.20–21 show that the concept of washing and refreshing was associated with the Spirit. Fire is an ancient symbol of judgment, refinement, and purification (cf. Notes). We may conclude that John and his contemporaries were already acquainted with all these nuances. The Holy Spirit was understood as being active in saying, purifying, and judging. The Spirit had definitely, but not frequently, been associated with the Messiah (Isa 11:12), whose coming would mean also the availability of the Spirit’s ministry.

**18** That John not only “exhorted” the people but “preached the good news” shows that grace accompanies the warning to flee from judgment. It is noteworthy that here and in v. 21 Luke



uses the word *laos* (“people”; cf. v. 21)—the term he specifically employs to describe not just a “crowd” (*ochlos*; v. 7) but a potentially responsive group (see comments on 1:68, 77). It is this “people,” who apparently stayed on to hear more of John’s message, who heard the further proclamation of “good news.”

**19–20** “Herod” (v. 19) is Herod Antipas, mentioned in v. 1. His brother is Philip, whose wife, Herodias, left him for Herod. His marriage to her was one of many sins, and the climactic sin “added” (v. 20) to this sordid series was his imprisonment of John. For John’s death, see 9:7–9 and the fuller account in Mark 6:17–29. By his brief anticipation here of John’s imprisonment, Luke underscores both the boldness of John and the sickness of the society he called to account. Verse 20 also indicates that John’s ministry was completed before that of Jesus began. The same point is made in Peters sermon to Cornelius (Acts 10:37–38). (C. Talbert, “The Lukan Presentation of Jesus Ministry in Galilee,” *Review and Expositor* 64 [1967]: 490, presents this relationship between John’s and Jesus’ ministry as part of a comprehensive theological scheme in Luke.)

## Notes

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- 1 Several alternate methods of chronological reckoning have been applied to the data in this verse. Some have proposed that Luke followed a chronology used at that time in the Near East by which the reign would have been counted, not from the actual date, but by a regnal year scheme. According to the Julian calendar, 19 August to 31 December A.D. 14 would have been the accession year, with the first full year beginning 1 January A.D. 15. The fifteenth year would have been 1 January to 31 December A.D. 29. This calculation and that cited in the commentary above allow for an A.D. 33 crucifixion date, which many now think likely.  
It is also possible that a Syrian system was used, by which Tiberius’s fifteenth year was 21 September A.D. 27 to 8 October A.D. 28. Still other possibilities exist (see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, pp. 29–37; cf. G. Ogg, “Chronology of the New Testament,” NBD, pp. 222–25). These dates must be correlated with those of Luke 3:23; John 2:20; 8:57, and other passages relating to the crucifixion, as well as those pertaining to Jesus birth. For further information about Herod Antipas, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).
- 2 ῥῆμα (*rhēma*, “word”) emphasizes the actual words spoken, whereas λόγος; (*logos*, “word”) looks more at the expression of thought (cf. AB, s.v.). Seventeen of *rhēma*’s twenty-three occurrences in the synoptics are in Luke.
- 3 Dipping and washing ritually in water was becoming increasingly common in the first century A.D. (cf. J. Thomas, *Le mouvement baptiste en Paletine et Syrie* [Gembloux: J. Duculot, 1935]). Such



illustrations were used at Qumran, both as one confessed his sins and entered the community (1QS 5.7–20) and on subsequent occasions (1QS 2.25ff.; 3.4–5). John’s probable knowledge of the Qumran community, which was in the Judean desert has led some to see a connection between his baptism and theirs. His baptism was not, however, intended for frequent repetition nor did it link the participants with a community like theirs. Probably as early as John’s day, baptism along with circumcision (for males) and the offering of a sacrifice marked the full conversion of a proselyte to Judaism. The striking difference between Jewish proselyte baptism and that which John practiced is that John’s subjects were already Jews for them to be baptized carried negative implications as to the sufficiency of Judaism. Josephus (Antiq. XVIII 117 [v. 2]) has a different understanding of John’s baptism, perhaps seeing it only as a lustration such as he knew was practiced at Qumran. In Josephus’s view, John wanted people to do righteous deeds and then be baptized. But Luke shows John baptizing repentant sinners, who then go on to live righteous lives.

- 4 Αὐτοῦ (*autou*, “for him”) is parallel with κυρίου (*kyriou*, “for the Lord”) and has the pronoun *autou* whereas Isa 40:3 LXX has τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν (*tou theou hēmōn*, “our God”). In this way, Luke makes it easier to understand that the words “the Lord” here refer to Christ (Cf. Matt 3:3; Mark 1:3).
- 7 Ὀν ἀπὸ τῆς μελλούσης ὀργῆς (*apo tēs mellousēs orgēs*, “from the coming wrath”), see also Rom 2:5; 1 Thess 1:10; Rev 6:15–17. John will allude to this in Luke 3:9 (Cf. TDNT, 5:422–47).
- 16 In the clause “with the Holy Spirit and with fire,” the second “with” (ἐν, *en*) was omitted in the 1973 edition of NIV. That was technically correct, as the Greek does not repeat the word. The 1978 edition added the second “with” possibly for stylistic reasons.
- 17 Among the relevant passages in OT, intertestamental, and NT literature on the Spirit, water, fire, purification, and judgment are Gen 19:24 (cf. Luke 17:29); Amos 7:4; Mal 3:2, Enoch 90:24–27; Pss Sol 15:6; 1QS 2.8; 1QpHab 2.11ff.; Matt 5:22; 13:40; 25:41; 1 Peter 1:7; Rev 20:14. For the association of fire with fluidity, see Dan 7:9–10 and 1QH 3.29–32. See also J.D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, Studies in Biblical Theology, 2d series, 15 (Naperville, Ill.: A.R. Allenson, 1970), pp. 8–22.

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## B. *The Baptism of Jesus* (3:21–22)

**21** For a comprehensive study of the events contained in vv. 21–22, the parallels in Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; and John 1:32–34 should be consulted. As in the birth narratives, there is at Jesus’ baptism a supernatural attestation. Many see in the event his “call” to his mission. His baptism comes as the climax of the baptism of “all the people” (cf. Notes).

Jesus was baptized, not because he was a sinner in need of repentance, but as a way of identifying himself with those he came to save. His reasons are expressed in Matthew 3:15. This is the first of several important events in Luke that took place when Jesus prayed (cf. esp. 6:12; 9:18, 29; 22:41). Though Luke’s description of the opening of the heavens is not so dramatic as



Mark's (1:10), it does make clear that Jesus had a true vision of the Deity (cf. Ezekiel's vision, Ezek 1:1; Stephen's, Acts 7:56, and Peter's, Acts 10:11). In contrast, the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration were enveloped by a cloud. Although they heard God speaking, their vision was of Christ and the heavenly visitors rather than of God in heaven.

**22** God had appeared in OT times through theophanies. Now the Spirit appears as a dove. Only Luke has the expression "in bodily form," giving more substance to the experience of the Spirit's presence. Luke does not say that anyone other than Jesus was aware of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps others present saw only a dove without realizing its significance. The descent of the Spirit is reminiscent of Genesis 1:2, but no specific parallel is drawn (cf. Notes).

"You are my Son, whom I love" designates Jesus as the unique Son of God. The words, like those heard at the Transfiguration (9:35; cf. Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7), effect a blend of OT christological passages: Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Present scholarly opinion holds that the concept of divine sonship in Jewish thought was not only applicable to angels (Job 1:6; 2:1) and to the nation of Israel and her kings (Exod 4:22; 2 Sam 7:14; Hos 11:1) but was coming into use, at least at Qumran, as a designation for the Messiah (4QFlor 10–14). At the Annunciation Jesus was designated the "Son of the Most High" (1:32). On his sonship and OT passages, see the comments on the Transfiguration (9:35) for a full discussion of the wording common to both passages. Here we may simply observe that the words "love" and "well pleased" convey the idea of choice and special relationship. Jesus has now received his commission. He is ready (following the Temptation, 4:1–12) to begin his ministry.

## Notes<sup>2</sup>

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## Teacher's Bible Commentary

### The Ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 3:1–38)

*The passage.*—During the reign of Tiberius Caesar, events were transpiring in an obscure corner of his empire which passed unnoticed by the larger world at the time. John and Jesus,

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<sup>2</sup> Liefeld, W. L. (1984). [Luke](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke* (Vol. 8, pp. 854–859). Zondervan Publishing House.



members of the subject Jewish nation, set something in motion that was to affect the world more profoundly than did the reign of the mighty Tiberius.

There are more questions than answers about John the Baptist. Exactly what were the factors that shaped his life? What was the substance of his message? What was the extent of his influence? We can only guess at the answers. John the Baptist was important to the gospel writers for one reason. He was the herald of the Lord's coming, the sign that the day of the Messiah had dawned.

The brief account of John's proclamation indicates that he was a stern preacher of righteousness and judgment. For him the coming of the Messiah meant that the ax was "laid unto the root of the trees." He challenged the widespread assumptions that religion was a matter of race and ritual. He demanded a practice coherent with profession.

Jesus' baptism accompanied by the descent of the Spirit constituted his ordination for his public ministry. The genealogy emphasizes the universal significance of that ministry. Luke traces the ancestry of Jesus to Adam. This is his way of saying that Jesus belongs to the whole of mankind.

*Special points.*—*Tiberius* (v. 1) succeeded Augustus in A.D. 14. Therefore, John's ministry began in A.D. 28–29. Upon the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., Palestine had been divided among his three sons, Archelaus, Herod (Antipas), and Philip. In A.D. 6 Archelaus had been deposed, and Judea had become an imperial province under the administrator of a governor. *Pontius Pilate* was the fifth of these governors.

High priests were supposed to serve for life. But under the Romans they were removed often for political reasons. *Annas* (v. 2) had been high priest from A.D. 6 to 15. His son-in-law *Caiaphas* held the office from A.D. 18 to 36. *Annas*, however, may still have been the dominant figure.

*Baptism of repentance* (v. 3) means that John's baptism was not empty ritual. Repentance on the part of sinners was demanded as a prerequisite. *For remission of sins* does not mean that baptism itself was the means of forgiveness. Rather, the repentant persons expected God to respond by forgiving them of their sins.

*Herod* (Antipas) was married to the daughter of Aretas the Nabatean (Arabian) king. He divorced her in order to marry Herodias, his half-brother's wife (v. 19). John, worthy successor to the prophets, challenged this evil in high places. As a result, he was imprisoned and finally beheaded. According to Josephus the place of his imprisonment was Machaerus, a fortress east of the Dead Sea.

*Truth for today.*—Repentance is a decisive act, affecting all of life. It makes a difference in the way a person speaks, acts, thinks, earns his living, and relates to other people. No doubt John would call on many modern church members to "bring forth fruits worthy of repentance," were



he among us today. There are far too many contradictions between what we say we believe and the way we live in the world.<sup>3</sup>

## Reading The New Testament

### The Ministry of John the Baptist (3:1–20)

The final *synkrisis* or comparison between John and Jesus that Luke sketches for his readers revolves around their public ministries. For example, Luke indicates that both men spend time in the wilderness before embarking on their ministries (3:2–4; 4:1–13) (Parsons, *Luke*, 62). Notably, though, Luke will narrate the ministry of John in twenty verses (3:1–20), but he will take the rest of the book to describe the far grander ministry of Jesus. Furthermore, in this unit (3:1–20), John’s ministry of faithful proclamation and baptism serve in part to set the stage for the even more momentous event of Jesus’ baptism (3:21–22).

As we saw in 2:1–7, Luke aims to locate the events surrounding John’s ministry, and, more important, Jesus’ life in their proper historical setting. Unlike the heroes of the legendary Greek and Roman epics like Odysseus and Aeneas, Luke’s biography of Jesus takes place at a specific time in human history (3:1–2). By means of these historical details, Luke seeks to establish further for Theophilus and his readers the veracity of his account of Jesus’ life (1:4). In the process, Luke again reinforces the concept that God’s intervention in the world through Jesus has “universal implications” given that he cites both Roman and Jewish rulers (3:1–2) (Parsons, *Luke*, 64).

From the beginning Luke decisively depicts John the Baptist as a prophet (1:76–77; 7:26). Unlike Mark who simply says that John appears preaching and baptizing (Mark 1:4–8), Luke first establishes John’s prophetic calling. Before anything else, the word of God prompts John while he is still in the wilderness (1:80; 3:2). Thereafter, his ministry consists of calling his fellow Jews to repent from their sins and to mark that repentance with baptism (3:3; cf. 1:76–77). Notably, Luke’s readers can observe from the beginning of this Gospel that “forgiveness is available outside the temple system” (Carroll, *Luke*, 91). Luke then explains the importance of the prophet John by citing “the words of the prophet Isaiah” (3:4). As Luke does so, he expands Mark’s reference to Isa 40:3 (Mark 1:3). Luke quotes Isa 40:3–5, which ends by declaring the worldwide

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<sup>3</sup> Tolbert, M. O. (1972). [Luke](#). In H. F. Paschall & H. H. Hobbs (Eds.), *The teacher’s Bible commentary* (pp. 638–639). Broadman and Holman Publishers.



mission of God: “all flesh shall see the salvation of God” (3:6). Much like Simeon’s prophecy in 2:32, here again from the outset Luke foreshadows the spread of the gospel that will take place throughout the rest of Luke and Acts.

Luke also greatly expands Mark’s account of the content of and the response to John’s preaching in 3:7–20. Rather than speaking exclusively to the Pharisees and Sadducees as Matthew has it (Matt 3:7), Luke says that John addresses “the crowds” (3:7). Like an eighth-century Hebrew prophet, John confronts the people’s hypocrisy. In particular, John seems to suggest that their actions do not match their oral pledges to God (3:8a). John stresses to his fellow Jews that they cannot claim Abrahamic heritage without also seeking to live like Abraham, whom Philo describes as embodying the “living law” of God (Philo, *Abr.* 5). As a result, judgment awaits the crowds if they fail to repent. The present-tense verbs in 3:9 “suggest that judgment is already underway in John’s preaching” (Carroll, *Luke*, 92).

The reaction to John’s preaching is both encouraging and informative. The crowds respond favorably to John’s compelling preaching. They desire to repent and avoid judgment. Yet the identity of those expressing contrition is surprising. Luke does not show the Pharisees, Sadducees, religious leaders, or rulers pledging repentance (7:30). Rather, the crowds (3:10), tax collectors (3:12), and soldiers (3:14) ask John how they can bear fruits worthy of repentance (3:8). John replies and centers his comments on the responsible stewardship of possessions and generous care for others. If the crowd has adequate resources, he encourages them to share. He prohibits tax collectors from fleecing taxpayers, and he directs soldiers to be content with their wages while avoiding the misuse of their power. Here John’s ministry and teaching foreshadow Jesus’ ministry and teaching both in Luke and in Acts, even though the impact of Jesus’ prophetic ministry will dwarf that of John’s. For example, similar types of people will respond to Jesus as respond to John—crowds, tax collectors, and centurions (e.g., 9:10–11; 19:1–10; 23:47–48; Acts 10:1–48). Furthermore, Jesus will repeatedly teach people to be generous stewards of their resources while avoiding the misuse of their power (e.g., 12:13–15; 22:24–27).

As a result, it is not surprising that all of the crowds contemplate whether John is the Messiah (3:15), even though Luke has informed his readers that John merely prepares the way for the Messiah (1:76; 3:4). In response, John draws an important distinction between his baptism and the Messiah’s baptism. John employs a water baptism when the repentant people of God desire forgiveness of sins. The Messiah, however, whom John himself characterizes as greater and more powerful, will employ a baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire (3:16). John’s prophecy ultimately finds its fulfillment in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit arrives at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–42). At the beginning of Acts, Jesus likewise refers to Pentecost as a baptism of the Holy Spirit, while also contrasting John’s water baptism with the impending Spirit baptism (Acts 1:5).



The contrast between John’s water baptism and the Messiah’s “Holy Spirit and fire” baptism appears to revolve around differing durations of impact. Water baptism evokes images of washing and cleansing, but the duration is temporary. Conversely, fire is associated with purification (e.g., with metals; cf. Num 31:21–23; Zech 13:9; Mal 3:2–3), and its impact is considered permanent. Fire burns the dross away. Similarly, Luke will narrate the permanent endowment of God’s Spirit upon the Jesus followers in the book of Acts. In essence, a baptism of “the Holy Spirit and fire” connotes permanent changes rather than temporary ones.

In addition, this contrast between John’s baptism and the baptism of the Messiah—whom Luke has already identified as Jesus for his readers (2:11)—helps to sum up the *synkrisis* or comparison between John and Jesus that Luke has artfully constructed since Luke 1:5. John and his parents embody the best traits of God’s people under the previous covenant(s). Zechariah the priest and his wife Elizabeth resemble Abraham and Sarah in Genesis. Moreover, Luke tells us they were “righteous before God” and “living blameless according to all the commandments” (1:6). The birth of their son, John, reminds us of Samuel’s birth (1:13–15; 1 Sam 1:1–27). John is “great in the sight of the Lord,” and he is “the prophet of the Most High” (1:76; 7:28–29). Even John, however, proclaims that one far “more powerful” and worthy is coming after him (3:16–17). In 3:16–17, John does not depict Jesus as one who will continue John’s prophetic ministry; instead, Jesus is one who will usher in an altogether different type of ministry. In short, in 3:15–17, Luke depicts Jesus as doing something new. What Jesus does will be greater than what has come before him—a work of God that is neither temporary nor short-lived, but permanent.

Finally, in 3:18–20, Luke concludes his narration of John’s ministry before narrating Jesus’ ministry. Herod Antipater, the tetrarch—or Rome’s client ruler—of Galilee and Perea, shuts up John in prison (cf. 7:18–35; 9:7–9). Unlike Mark who communicates extensively about how the dysfunctional family dynamics of Herod, his wife, and his daughter result in John’s death (Mark 6:17–29), Luke greatly abbreviates this event. In doing so, Luke accentuates a simple but clear contrast between the faithful prophet and the corrupt ruler—much like we encounter in the OT (e.g., Elijah and King Ahab in 1 Kgs 18–21; Garland, *Luke*, 160). When Herod Antipater (or Antipas) divorces his wife in order to marry his half-brother’s ex-wife, John rebukes the ruler. John’s bold actions then lead to his imprisonment and eventual demise (9:7–9); John’s tragic ending also ominously foreshadows the outcome of Jesus’ prophetic ministry in Luke 22–23.

## **Preparation for the Ministry of Jesus (3:21–4:13)**

### **Jesus’ Baptism (3:21–22)**





Unlike Matthew (3:13–17) and Mark (1:9–11), who speak of John baptizing Jesus, Luke puts the spotlight solely on Jesus. Having mentioned John’s imprisonment (3:20), Luke does not even refer to John at Jesus’ baptism (3:21–22). Instead, Luke’s narration of John’s ministry is complete. Now, it is time to focus on Jesus and his ministry. Similar to the way that Luke alternated between John and Jesus when narrating their annunciations (1:8–20 and 1:26–38) and births (1:57–80 and 2:1–52), Luke now moves the discussion from John’s ministry (3:1–20) to Jesus’ ministry (3:21–24:53).

Despite its brevity, this passage about Jesus’ baptism is theologically rich. First, Luke compares Jesus to “all the people” (3:21). Jesus is not separate from the crowd; rather he is one of them. He simply joins the masses in the act of baptism (Craddock, *Luke*, 50). He does not demand individual attention or pomp and circumstance. Rather, “he submits to the same obedience and conditions required by Israel” (Garland, *Luke*, 168). Luke has already depicted Jesus at his birth as a Jewish king who is born into a spiritually devout family of humble means (1:32–33; 2:11, 21–24). Now, he shows a worthy yet humble Jesus being baptized among the masses of repentant sinners (3:16, 21).

Second, Luke depicts Jesus’ baptism as an anointing and empowerment by the Holy Spirit as well as an affirmation by God (Tannehill, *Luke*, 83–86). Previously Luke informed his readers that Jesus’ conception was due to the miraculous intervention of the Holy Spirit (1:35). Now that same Spirit anoints and imbues him with divine power to carry out and fulfill God’s redemptive purposes (e.g., 4:1, 14, 18–19; Acts 10:38). In other words, Luke’s focus is not exclusively or even primarily on the baptism. Rather, Luke places the emphasis on God’s divine empowerment of Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit. Luke wants his readers to understand that God’s Spirit will be the illuminating force that guides and enables Jesus’ words and actions.

In addition, among the Gospel writers, Luke alone adds another important detail. After the baptism is complete (aorist participle), Jesus is in the ongoing process of praying (present participle) when the heavens open and the Holy Spirit descends upon him (3:21). Throughout his Gospel, Luke greatly accentuates the link between prayer and the presence of the Holy Spirit for his readers. Both here at Jesus’ baptism and later at Pentecost (Acts 1:12–14, 24; 2:1–13), prayer precedes the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Luke creates a strong correlation between prayer and divine revelation (e.g., 6:12–16; 9:28–31; 23:34, 46). For example, clarity about the Lord’s will frequently arrives amid prayer in Luke’s Gospel. In this instance, Jesus’ faithful act of praying “provides the appropriate state of receptivity” for the Holy Spirit’s empowerment and God’s declaration from heaven (Tannehill, *Luke*, 84).

Finally, God’s declaration about Jesus’ identity is as important as the promise of the Holy Spirit’s enablement. God speaks directly to Jesus saying, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:22). The Lord’s words echo two OT texts, Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1. “You are my Son” corresponds with Ps 2, which celebrates the coronation of Israel’s king. “The Beloved; with



you I am well pleased” corresponds with Isa 42, a servant song that celebrates God’s chosen servant in a postexilic context. Here at Jesus’ baptism, however, the two ideas are merged together: “In combination, they present the divine perspective that Jesus is the Servant-Messiah” (Garland, *Luke*, 169). Here, God articulates both his approval of and his purposes for Jesus. Even though Jesus is amid repentant sinners, he is clearly not one of them. Yet God also assures Jesus of his matchless identity. Gabriel had already informed Mary of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God (1:32, 35). Now the Father relays the same message directly to Jesus. Hereafter, Luke will repeatedly build on this title, Son of God, to clarify further Jesus’ role (e.g., Luke 4:3, 41; 22:70; Acts 9:20). The only other occasion in which Luke directly quotes the voice of God will be at the transfiguration (9:35).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Arterbury, A. E. (2019). [\*Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary\*](#) (pp. 23–28). Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Incorporated.