

PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

Luke 3:1-14

Key Verse: 3:2

"...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert."

Study Questions:

1. What do the names of the political and religious leaders whom Luke mentions tell us about the political situation in the times of John? About the religious situation? (1-2)
2. How did John prepare himself to challenge his times? Why did John live in the desert? What did it mean that the word of God came to him? Think about the difference the word of God makes--1Pe 1:23-25; Heb 4:12; 1Sa 3:1,7,21. Can you think of any other servants of God to whom God's word came?
3. Read verse 3. Why did John preach a message of repentance? Why did all men respond to John's stern message of repentance?
4. Read verses 4-6. What does Isaiah 40:3-5 tell us about John's ministry? By whom will all mankind see God's salvation? Why?
5. Read verses 7-14. How did the religious leaders (Mt 3:7; Isa 29:13) respond to John's message? What did John do for them? How did the crowds respond to the message of repentance and judgment? What do the fruits of repentance mean to each person? How can we prepare our hearts for the word of God to come upon us?

Luke the historian displays before our eyes in today's passage the ministry of John the Baptist from beginning to end. Luke tells us what the world situation was when John began his ministry. Moreover, how it was possible for John to fulfill his mission as forerunner of the Messiah in that dark time. Finally Luke tells us how John prepared the way for the Lord.

First, the word of God came to him (1-2).

What kind of time was it when John the Baptist began his ministry? In short, it was the time when the work of God was totally impossible. At that time, Tiberius Caesar, the successor to Caesar Augustus, was the Emperor of Rome. He demanded all the subject nations' unconditional submission to his rule. At the beginning, the Roman Empire persuaded colonial people with the political ideology, "Pax Romana." But Roman Emperors ignored their political ideology when the Roman Empire became unrivaled. Emperor Tiberius, the successor to Caesar Augustus, ignored basic respect for colonial people and wielded his power at random. Judea, the southern part of Israel, was under the control of a Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who later condemned Jesus to death.

In fact, the root problem of Judah was the internal corruption of her leaders. When Herod the Great died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided into four parts, each to be ruled over by one of his three sons--Herod, Philip and Lysanias; Philip ruled two parts. They were not called kings, but "tetrarchs," rulers of one of four parts. This Herod Jr. took his own brother's wife, Herodias (19), and enraged his brother Philip until he held a grudge against him. The division of the kingdom was caused by the power struggle among corrupted, unjust leaders of each territory. As a result, many innocent people in the respective territories were maimed beyond description and killed. When we review the world history of recent decades, we see that the ideological war between capitalism and communism shed innocent blood in the satellite countries of both blocks. During the ideological war, many U.S. soldiers who fought, not knowing why they should fight, became slaves of fear and psychiatric patients. The movie, "The Deer Hunter," well described how people killed each other, not knowing why. In the course of ideological war, the Vietnamese were the most victimized. Political struggle makes innocent people endlessly sorrowful.

What did the religious leaders do in that dark time? There should be only one high priest. But Luke says there were two high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. This reveals that the high priestly office had become a political tool under the garments of the "holy high priests." The high priest should be the servant of God's word. The high priest should be a shepherd of God's flock under his care. The high priest is supposed to give his life to win his people over to God. But these high priests sold their consciences in order to collaborate with Roman authorities and to destroy Jesus. Their

evilness made people suffer from fear and despair. In short, the time when John began his ministry was the time when the work of God was totally impossible.

How could John dare to play the role of Jesus' forerunner? Look at verse 2. "...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." Humanly speaking, in that dark time, John was like a little fish caught in the rushing torrent of a stream. He could do nothing by himself. But he prepared himself to do the work of God by living a pure life in the desert. What then happened to John? Look at verse 2 again. "...during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." As we have studied, the time when John lived was the time when no one dared to be a witness of the true Light, Jesus. No one could imagine upholding the torch of the gospel. But when the word of God came to him, John the Baptist could begin his work of preparing the way for the Lord.

Jeremiah is another example to whom the word of God came. He was an ordinary man from a country priest's family. But when the word of God came to him, he was filled with the Spirit of God and, without fear, began to deliver only the message of God's judgment, for God called him to deliver only the message of God's judgment. People who lived in a desperate situation really did not like to listen to his message of judgment, so they put him in a dungeon to shut his mouth. But they could not shut his mouth because the word of God was with him. There was a monk named Martin Luther who was in deep agony because of his marriage problem. This problem made him a slave of guilty conscience as a monk. But when the last part of Romans 1:17, "The righteous will live by faith," came upon him, he could solve his own inner spiritual problem. When God's word came upon him, Martin Luther bravely challenged the corruption of the church in those times.

There was a young man named Mr. Han. He had a conflict in his heart, whether to become a college professor or a minister. One day he cried many tears to solve this problem. Then the word of God came upon him, which was John 10:11: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." As soon as the word of God came upon him, Mr. Han cried all night for his selfishness, and decided to become a servant of God. But under Japanese occupation, Mr. Han had nothing to do for God. So he gathered orphans to take care of them. Mr. Han had to beg, going

around from house to house, to feed the orphans. There were several T.B. patients among the orphans. Soon Mr. Han contracted T.B. As a result, one of his lungs had to be removed. But he had a shepherd heart for them to the end. Later he ministered to a church. At that time, his church was the biggest in number in the world.

There was a man named Paul David Cho. He was bright but he couldn't afford to go to school. He only attended a seminary of the Assemblies of God, whose faculty members were none other than his mother-in-law and several people who believed the Bible as the living word of God. At the age of 21, he began a church in a tent. When he prayed in the middle of the night, the word of God came upon him. It was Mark 9:23. It says, "If you can?" said Jesus. "Everything is possible for him who believes." From that moment, he began to believe that nothing is impossible with God. God gave him faith that nothing is impossible for him who believes. Since then God blessed his ministry. Finally, he had to build the largest church in the world, with over one-half million members, in this generation. The word of God changes men's hearts. Hebrews 4:12 says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." World history is a vicious circle of fallen men. But the word of God stands forever and gives life to men (1Pe 1:23-25).

When the word of God came to John, he became as powerful as Elijah. When the word of God came to him, his spirit paralleled that of Elijah. And John went around to preach the baptism of repentance all over Judea. "The word of God came to him" does not necessarily mean that he chose one word of God as we choose a key verse for a year; it means that when John prepared himself to be God's servant by living a holy life in the desert, God gave the word of God to him to do the work of God. When Jesus was ready to do God's work after baptism by John, God gave him one word, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Lk 3:22). The voice from God remained in Jesus' heart forever, even at the time of his crucifixion. Here we learn that we must study the Bible until one word comes upon us.

Second, the word of God began to work through John (3).

It was impossible for anyone to preach the message of repentance

because at that time, evil people looked normal and good people looked strange. In this situation, John preached the message of repentance so that the people might turn to God to receive the grace of forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins gives utmost joy to all human beings. It is like a leper becoming a normal man. John the Baptist also delivered the message of judgment so that the people might escape the wrath and judgment of God. There are many people who believe the love of God, but never appreciate the grace of forgiveness of sin. Those who are numb to the grace of forgiveness are like lepers who are numb all the time. John prepared the way for the Lord by preaching the message of repentance and judgment.

Third, all mankind will see God's salvation (4-6).

Look at verses 4b-5. "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth.'" These verses are the fulfillment of prophecy concerning the coming of John the Baptist and his mission, expressed in prophetic form (Isa 40:3-5), and they are a warning to prepare the way for the king's coming. It is a clear warning to his people to prepare their minds and hearts to welcome the Messiah by repenting of their proud and crooked minds and evildoing. The gist of the prophecy is "all mankind will see God's salvation" when they accept Jesus (6). Many people do many things to save themselves. But no one can save himself from his sins. Only in Jesus, all mankind will see God's salvation. For this, God gave his one and only Son Jesus Christ to save us from sin and to give us eternal life.

Fourth, the response to the message of repentance (7-14).

What did John do for the people coming to him? Look at verses 7,8. "John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father." For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.'" Obviously, this was a message to old Christians. In Matthew 3:7, "You brood of vipers!" refers to the Pharisees and Sadducees. John told them to repent of their spiritual pride in being Abraham's children, because God could raise Abraham's children out of stones. If they would not repent of their spiritual pride, they would not escape the impend-

ing judgment of God. Look at verse 9. "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." John was serious about their spiritual pride in being Abraham's descendants. In short, they honored God with their lips but their hearts were far from God (Isa 29:13), so they could not repent of their spiritual pride. What was worse, they could not produce the fruit of repentance.

John also spoke to the ordinary people. They were the last persons who could have repented. But to our surprise, they repented sincerely. They really wanted to see God's salvation. "'What should we do then?' the crowd asked. John answered, 'The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same'" (10-11). "Tax collectors also came to be baptized. 'Teacher,' they asked, 'what should we do?' 'Don't collect any more than you are required to,' he told them" (12-13). "Then some soldiers asked him, 'And what should we do?' He replied, 'Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely--be content with your pay'" (14). Even cruel soldiers sincerely repented when the message of repentance was preached. Like John the Baptist, servants of God's word should deliver the message of repentance and judgment. It is amazing that everybody wanted to repent, so that they might have salvation from God.

John delivered the message of repentance and judgment, but people responded so eagerly because they were yearning for the holiness of God. Most people have yearning desires to repent and become holy children of God. But because their leaders do not repent, they do not repent. In the past, many people boldly became monks or nuns and practiced asceticism in order to satisfy their holy desires. One man taught Genesis to some nuns. But the nuns strongly rejected studying the God of Isaac, because in that part there was a narrative of a beautiful marriage between Isaac and Rebekah. The Bible teacher was very sorry for them because they suppressed their emotional feelings beyond measure. One day the nuns invited their Bible teacher to the 42nd anniversary of their convent. The Bible teacher went and heard one of his Bible student nuns play a cello solo, Schubert's "Serenade." After the performance, she received a standing ovation. She made a brief remark before the audience: "In the past, I liked romantic music. But now I love the Son of God since John 3:16 came to my heart. It says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'" May God help us live a holy life so the word of God will come upon us.