
In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene—²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. ³He went into the whole region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴Just as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet:

A voice of one calling in the wilderness,

“Prepare the way of the Lord! Make his paths straight.

⁵Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low.

The crooked will become straight, and the rough ways smooth.

⁶And everyone will see the salvation of God.”

God’s plan of salvation was not half baked. We see it clearly in the Gospel today. We see it in just how specific and orderly God is. Even in this account of John the Baptist, we see God’s meticulous plan in the when, the where, and the what of his message. As we look at this account from Luke, we also notice that God acts with incredible organization in our lives too.

The first half of this section lays out the when. We hear about all these historical figures who were in charge of different people and different places at the time. This shows that the scriptures are not simply stories, but an accounting of God’s role in history. But maybe even more so, this list of names and titles reminds us that God’s plan of when to carry out his promise of salvation is precise. The right people were in power, and it was at exactly the right point in Roman history. John the Baptist stepped onto the scene at the right time historically. The Roman empire was going through a time of great peace and growth. Their road system and army allowed safe and distant travel. This would come in handy as the good news of the Savior spread. But it was also the right time spiritually. Judaism had morphed into a religion of work-righteousness. The religious leaders were leading people away from God’s mercy to be placed at the mercy of these sinful and selfish men. The people were starving for a Savior from sin, someone to rescue them from the constant merry-go-round of sin, sacrifice, and failed self-betterment.

God didn’t just plan out the when of John’s appearing, but the where too. I think the first question we might ask is “Why does John not go preach in Jerusalem?” That was David’s royal city. It was the place God had built his temple. And so many people were there. But instead, God sent John out into the wilderness. No one lived there. In fact, at the time it was an inhabitable place. People would have had to travel, and when they got there, there would not have been any of the pleasantries that the infrastructure of society provides. And yet, as we’ll find out as we discuss John’s message, the wilderness was the best place for God’s word to have its full effect on them.

Finally, we get to the what. We hear that God’s word came to John. So, John was not speaking on his own accord, but delivering the message God had given him to share. John began preaching this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And maybe you ask, “How is John’s baptism of repentance any different than the baptism Jesus institutes?” Well, both were instituted by God. Both conveyed forgiveness, new life, and a connection with Christ. But there were some differences. John was baptizing people into the Savior who was not yet known by the world. Also, John’s mission was not to make disciples of all nations and win the world to faith, but rather to prepare God’s people for the Messiah they had waited for. There is great debate over whether

John's baptism was synonymous with the baptism Jesus would later institute, but since none of us were around with John in the wilderness to be baptized, this debate is only theoretical to us and not actually practical for our lives. Rather, I'd like to focus on the message he was preaching along with his baptism.

John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We need to spend a little time with the idea of repentance though. Repentance is not simply feeling shame over sin. Even the unbeliever is pained by what he does. His response though is to focus on self-correction and self-improvement. None of this can actually take away sin. Repentance is also not simply an emotional response to show that you are really sorry. Some will claim that emotionalism is the main ingredient in repentance, but all of us have different levels of emotion. No, what repentance truly means is a change of heart that turns from sin and guilt to forgiveness by God's grace.

Because of that, we could say repentance is surrender. It's surrender to the fact that you are a sinner who cannot fix the mess you've made of your soul. It's surrender to the truth that the only correction to your sin problem comes from the gracious and merciful hand of God. This would have been key for the Jews coming out to the wilderness to hear John speak. He did not shy away from sharing with them their sin. They needed to hear it. Their teachers had not been emphasizing sin, but what they could do for God to improve their relationship with him. As Isaiah prophesied, the valleys needed to be filled, and the mountains needed to be brought low. The people needed to be led to stop putting their trust in themselves and their actions, because it had gotten them nowhere with God. Instead, John preached a message of surrender from work-righteousness and trust in God for forgiveness.

But even though the message from God is what was most important, the when and where also help drive home this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The when speaks to repentance. Israel had fallen from its place of prominence in the world. Though they were not in chains, they were certainly captives under the Romans. So, the people felt that the weight of sin that all their sacrifices could not lift off them and they could feel the breath of their captors always looking over their shoulders. That feeling of helplessness would have been all too prevalent. It was a time when the people hungered for liberation.

The where speaks to repentance too. The desert is a lonely place. When you leave the comforts of civilization, you quickly notice that in the desert you are at the mercy of God's providence. It was just last year that people were trapped in the desert during a music festival, and with all the technology of our day, people were panicked because they had no control over their circumstances. All of the people who went out to see John would have been roughing it. Out in the wilderness, their dependance on themselves seemed so foolish.

God had sent his final prophet, John the Baptist, at the right time to the right place with the right message. And the point of all of this was to prepare the way for the Savior, so that people would see their inability to corral sin and focus on their soon-to-come Savior Jesus, so that "everyone [would] see the salvation of God."

God's plans for us are also not half baked. Just as we see his careful design in creation, we see it in our salvation as well. We see it in the when and where his voice speaks. Remember, we cannot find God on our own. Therefore, God must be revealed to us. But God doesn't reveal himself in the places we want to find him. Sure, we can know there is a God by taking a walk through the woods and seeing that the complexities of creation could not be an accident. But that doesn't make you any more connected to God, because God does not reveal his salvation for the world through nature. Instead, God brings us out to the spiritual wilderness. He comes to us in the last places we would expect him to show his forgiveness and salvation.

People always expect these big stories of God bringing his word to them. They expect the sort of experience Paul had on his way to Damascus. While God can come to us with his word in flashy ways, for most of us, he's

come without pomp. Maybe you were brought to the font as just a child, baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and sealed as a child of God. Maybe your parents brought you to church Sunday after Sunday, so God coming to you was quiet and consistent. Maybe you came to know Jesus a little later in life. A friend, a family member, or your spouse shared with you the promises of Jesus. Again, it was not flashy. It probably didn't involve God's voice booming down from heaven. God came to you at the right time and the right place to deliver the truth you so desperately needed to know.

God does the same now too. You know what Jesus has done for you, and yet God continues to speak to you through his word. You hear it when you study the scriptures at home and with friends. You hear it when you sit in the pew and hear the voice of your pastor, speaking not his own words but God's words. None of this looks glorious. In fact, it looks pretty unimpressive, pretty normal. But so often, that's where and when God brings his word into the world, in the last places and times we least expect it.

And what does that voice of God say? What God says through his messengers is also exactly what his hearers need to take to heart. The message God has shared with us since we came to know him has not changed. Again and again he calls us to repentance, just like John. And whether our baptism from Jesus is the same as the baptism of John or not, it also is connected with repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

Again, God speaks through his representatives to point out sin, not simply to make people feel ashamed but to lead them to understand their spiritual helplessness. There are probably times you come to church feeling sorry over your sins and longing to hear those words of Christ that you've been forgiven at the cross. But there are probably other times when you come with a lot of pride and arrogance in your heart. You've justified the way you've treated others or disobeyed God. You aren't sorry, because you don't think your sin is a big deal.

I'm not going to tell you that you need to end up in a puddle of despair on the floor, because that's not repentance. But what I am going to tell you is that if you walk in here with arrogance in your heart, if you think you've done a pretty good job of living for God, then it's past time that you take a trip out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist. It's time for the highways of your heart to be straightened and made level. It's time for you to recognize the pervasiveness of your sin and the Savior who came to die for all those sins. It's time for you to surrender to work-righteous living and see that you are only right with God because Christ's precious blood made you right with God. And if you think these words are meant more for the person sitting next to you, then you still don't get it.

Thank God that he brings the message we need to hear at the right time and the right place, and that he continues to bring it to hammer away at our stubborn hearts. He does this so that we, along with the whole world, "see the salvation of God," salvation found only in our Lord Jesus. As you continue your Advent preparation, let God's word make straight your hearts and minds, to surrender all pride and find peace in the Lord's Messiah. Amen.