

THE FORERUNNER, JOHN THE BAPTIST THE PIVOTAL POINT OF HISTORY

LUKE 03:01–06

Introduction – Pivotal Point of History

The coming of Jesus Christ was the pivotal point of human history. When He came to earth, earth saw the Son of God Himself (1 Jn. 1:1-3). His impact upon the world can never be overstated. He changed the world so much that men measure their years by Him. Some may dispute His significance, but they are wrong. And their misjudgment will be confronted some day in the future. When? When Christ returns. Scripture declares that He is going to return to earth. He is going to return as a Judge, not as a Saviour — the Judge who will prove that He is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the God of very God, the Messiah. He is going to prove that He is the Salvation of God Almighty.

A Person of such magnitude, the Person whose coming was to be the pivotal point of history, needed a forerunner. He needed someone who could run ahead of Him and arouse the people to prepare for His coming. That forerunner was John the Baptist, a man who is an example to us all.

- I. He was a man who launched the most pivotal point of history (v. 1).
- II. He was a man called out of the wilderness (v. 2).
- III. He was a man who preached repentance and forgiveness of sin (v. 3).
- IV. He was a man who cried out apocalyptically: prepare, make God's paths straight (vv. 4-6).

I. *Luke 03:01 Call of John, the Messiah's Forerunner*

John was a man who launched the most pivotal point of history — the coming of Christ. Some may dispute that the coming of Christ is the most significant event in history, but Scripture proclaims that God will someday reveal the fact to all. Luke points to the fact by dating the coming of Christ with significant events and historical rulers. The very first event was God's call of John. Therefore, the beginning of the greatest period in all history began with the call of John, the Lord's forerunner. Note several facts.

1. Tiberius Caesar was in the fifteenth year of his reign when God called John. Tiberius was the second Roman Emperor, beginning his reign in AD 14. Therefore, the emergence of John took place between AD 28-29.
 2. Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He was both the civil ruler and a military commander. The situation had grown so bad in Judea that Rome had to remove Archelaus from civil control and move in a military commander. Therefore, Judea was ruled directly by Roman authority at this time. Pilate held office from AD 26-36.
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3. Herod Antipas was tetrarch of Galilee and Perea. Tetrarch simply means a ruler over a fourth part. Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. He inherited his territory at his father's death and ruled from BC 4 to AD 39. Note that he was the ruler over Galilee where Jesus spent most of His time ministering. (See *Herod Antipas* and *Herod the Tetrarch*, Mt. 14:1-14)
4. Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis. He was a reputable leader, known as a fair and just ruler. Caesarea Philippi was built and named after him. Caesarea was where Peter made his great confession.
5. Lysanius was tetrarch of Abilene. Nothing of importance is known about him.
6. Annas and Caiaphas were High Priests. This statement throws a revealing light upon the high priesthood of Jesus' day. It shows just how political and corrupt the high priesthood had become. There was never to be more than one priest at any given time, for the priesthood was supposed to be for life and was supposed to be hereditary. But with the coming of Roman rule, the High Priest became a political power base. Rome used the position to secure power over Jewish life. They offered and gave the position to men who were cooperative and willing to let the people follow Roman rule. For example, between BC 37 and AD 26 twenty-eight different men were installed and removed as High Priests.

The point Luke is making is just this: the High Priest's office had become corrupted, and religious positions had become politically motivated. Annas, who had served as High Priest between AD 7-14, was still the power behind the throne. Caiaphas was officially the High Priest in Rome's eyes, but Annas was still the one to whom most Jewish leaders looked. This is actually seen during the trials of Jesus. Jesus was taken first to Annas, despite the fact that he was not the official High Priest (Jn. 18:13).

Gal 1:4 Who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

Mark 1:15 "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

MATHEW 14:01–14 HEROD ANTIPAS

Herod is mentioned three times in Scripture. He is mentioned here at the execution of John; when some Pharisees warned Jesus that Herod planned to kill Him (Lk. 13:31); and when Herod stood face to face with Jesus at Jesus' trial (Lk. 23:8f).

Herod's life can be dramatically seen in a discussion of the outline points. (Mt. 14:1-14).

1. Herod had a guilty conscience for two reasons (vv. 1-2).

- a. He lived a life of gross sin which is clearly illustrated in this passage.
- b. He imprisoned and killed a prophet of God.
2. Herod lived an immoral life (vv. 3-4). Herod had married the daughter of Aretas, King of the Nabatean Arabs: but on a trip to Rome he had visited his half-brother and was deeply attracted to his wife, Herodias. He seduced her and talked her into returning with him. Herod's own wife discovered his plans; and fearing for her life, she fled to her father, King Aretas (see pt. 7, Herod's doom, for Aretas' reaction).

Two serious sins were committed by Herod. He had put away his own wife (her life was probably threatened), and he had stolen the wife of his half-brother. It was against such immorality that John preached.

3. Herod loved the world and was extremely ambitious. As a result, he experienced much fear as all worldly and ambitious men do (see Mt. 6:19-20). Herod's mind was set on the things of the world.
 - a. He was a builder given to extravagance. He reconstructed Sepphoris (4 miles north of Nazareth) and built a new seaport on the southwest side of the Sea of Galilee, naming it Tiberias in honour of the Roman emperor. His love for the world and for luxury are evident from this passage.
 - b. Herod was ambitious and envious of others. When Herod Agrippa was given the title of King, he too coveted the title of King. He tried his best to secure it, but it was this ambition that caused him to lose his throne (see pt. 7).
 - c. Herod's close friendship with Pilate at the Lord's crucifixion would also indicate a tendency to capitalize upon *close connections*.
 - d. Herod imprisoned John for two reasons. First, he feared John's popularity as a prophet among the people. He feared John might say something that would arouse the people to rebel and cause him to lose favour with Rome. Rome would then strip him of his power and wealth and replace him with someone who could control the people. His ambition and love for the world caused him to pursue the safest course - that of imprisoning John. Second, Herod gave in to his wife, Herodias. Herodias despised John with a vengeance because of his preaching against sin, and she apparently nagged Herod to get rid of John until he did.
4. Herod lived a life of foolishness and fleshliness (v. 6-8). Herod's fleshliness is seen in his lust and seduction of Herodias (see pt. 2) and in the events of this passage. He apparently followed the Greek practice of celebrating special events with lavish feasts, heavy drinking, and suggestive, lustful, and passionate dancing. When he was full of drink, he was stirred with such lust and passion after his step-

daughter that he offered her anything, even half of his kingdom. Just how fleshly minded he was, is seen in the fact that he would allow one of the royal family (his step-daughter) to dance so suggestively before the royal court. Such dancing was done by professional prostitutes, not by members of the royal family.

Herod's foolishness and his marred judgment are illustrated in the *reckless offer* to his step-daughter and in believing that he had to keep a wicked and dishonourable oath.

5. Herod had an unholy pride and weakness (v. 9). Herod made a foolish promise. Now he was faced with keeping a wicked oath or with breaking one of God's major laws, "You shall not murder." His pride prevented him from confessing his error. He feared being shamed and embarrassed by a woman's tantrums before his guests and being the butt end of their jokes and amusement. He knew what he should do, but in *pride and weakness* before men, he buckled and caved in to a terrible sin.
6. Herod demonstrated a savage cruelty (v. 10-11). The very way in which Herod executed John and had his bloody head brought in on a platter reveals a depth of cruelty and drunken debauchery that is enormously repulsive to any decent person. His cruelty is also seen in that he had unjustly arrested John and had left him in a rat and roach infested dungeon for about a year and a half.

Josephus, the prominent historian of that day, writes that it was Herod's worldly ambition that led him to arrest and execute John.

"Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late" (*Josephus Complete Works*. Antiquities 18.5:1-2).

7. Herod was doomed (v. 12-14). As mentioned above in point 2, Herod's first wife had to flee for her life, seeking refuge with her father, King Aretas. Seeking vengeance, the king went to war against Herod and bitterly defeated him. A desperate appeal to Rome saved Herod's life just in the nick of time. However, his doom was sealed just a few years later when he envied and sought the title of King for himself. In a plot of intrigue, Herod Agrippa persuaded the Roman government that Herod Antipas was plotting a rebellion against Rome. The emperor Caligula was convinced and exiled Herod Antipas to Spain. He died there.

The doom of Herod is dramatically seen when he stood face to face with Jesus at Jesus' trial. Jesus "gave him no answer" (Lk. 23:9). Christ faced Him in stone

silence. The silence was a rebuke and condemned Herod's flippant and worldly attitude toward life.

Herod died without God. Why? He had two of the greatest witnesses in human history: John the Baptist and Christ Himself. It is written that:

Mark 6:20 Because Herod feared John and protected him, knowing him to be a righteous and holy man. When Herod heard John, he was greatly puzzled; yet he liked to listen to him. □

MATHEW 14:1–14 HEROD THE TETRARCH

The word Tetrarch means the ruler of a fourth part; however, the word eventually came to mean the subordinate ruler of some section of a country. Herod the Tetrarch is Herod Antipas, the Herod who was prince over Galilee and Perea from 4 BC to 39 AD. He was the son of Herod the Great and his Samaritan wife, Malthace (Mt. 2:1). He was the full brother of Archelaus (Mt. 2:22). □

II. *Luke 03: 02 The Call of God*

John was a man called out of the wilderness. Note three points.

1. God's call came to John in the wilderness, in an obscure place. The place where John was reared was so slightly populated that it was known as a wilderness. The area consisted of only six small towns or villages scattered far apart. God found him in the most obscure place.

Thought 1. The place where a person is does not matter; a person's heart is what matters. If a person's heart is right toward God, God will call him no matter where he is. No one is hidden from God, no matter how obscure his residence is. The Word of God is not limited; it reaches even to the wilderness.
2. God's call was a very personal matter. Note: John never revealed how God spoke to him. Did God call him through a vision, through the appearance of an angel, through an audible voice, or through an inner sense? We do not know. John kept the matter in his heart; it was just too intimate, too meaningful an experience. And his heart was genuine and pure. He was not willing to lower his intimacy with God by talking about it and boasting in it, that is, by acting super-spiritual.
3. God's call was for John to serve God rather than to serve institutional religion. John was somewhere around thirty years of age, the age when he was to become a full-fledged priest by descent. Remember, his father Zechariah was a priest, and the priesthood was by descent. He was supposed to have been in training for some five years, and when he reached age thirty he was to begin serving in the temple. But God's

call to John was to a different ministry, a ministry that fitted into God's plans much more than institutional religion.

Thought 1. It is God who calls a man, not institutional religion. A man's first loyalty is to God, not to institutional religion.

Thought 2. God moves outside *institutional religion* as well as within institutional religion (cp. Simeon, probably a priest, and Anna, a prophetess within the temple). Note two things.

- 1) *Institutional religionists* often frown and oppose those ministering *outside* the institution. They feel threatened, as though the *outside minister* is against them. Sometimes they are right; the outsider is sometimes against them. But if the outside minister is truly ministering, there should be support and encouragement. However, too often cooperation is not given. The institutional religionist too often fears the loss of authority, position, and security; therefore, he opposes the *outside minister*. Such motives are corrupt and need to be corrected. Ministers, both within and without institutional religion, need to be about God's call and business. They should not be wasting time by struggling against each other. Time is too short, and God's call comes to men both within and without institutional religion. Each needs to support the other in God's calling.
- 2) A man must do and serve God as God calls and wills.

John 15:16 "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."

2 Cor 5:18, 20 All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

Eph 3:7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

1 Tim 1:12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service.

2 Tim 1:11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

III. **Luke 03: 03 A Baptism of Repentance**

John was a man who preached repentance and forgiveness of sins. Note the exact wording: he preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

This simply means that if a man wished to be forgiven his sins, he repented. He turned from his sins, and changed his life; then he was baptized. Baptism was the sign to his neighbours and the world that he was changing his life (repenting) because he wanted God to forgive his sins. The order is this:

=> A man wanted God to forgive his sins.

=> The man therefore made a decision to repent, to turn from his sinful ways, and to change his life (See *Repentance*, Acts 17:29-30).

=> The man was immediately baptized.

Now note. It was baptism that proclaimed to everyone that the man wanted forgiveness and was turning from his sins (repenting). Baptism was the act, the sign, that said to the world that the man was thereafter going to live a changed life so that God would forgive his sins.

Two simple facts are being stated.

1. Forgiveness of sins is conditional. A man must repent to be forgiven, and if he truly repents, he is baptized. Baptism is part of the act of repentance!
2. Baptism is the immediate witness and sign that a man is repenting and changing his life. If a man is truly sincere in seeking forgiveness, he is baptized and does change his life, turning away from sin and turning to God (See *Baptism of Jesus and John*, Mt. 3:11).

Acts 2:38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Mat 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Luke 13:3 "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Acts 3:19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.

Ezek 18:31 Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?

Joel 2:12 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.'

ACTS 17:29–30 REPENTANCE

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone — an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” Acts 17:29-30

Repentance means to change; to turn; to change one’s mind; to turn one’s life. It is a turning away from sin and turning toward God. It is a change of mind, a forsaking of sin. It is putting sin out of one’s thoughts and behaviour. It is resolving never to think or do a thing again. (See Mt. 3:2; Lk. 13:2-3; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 26:20.) The change is turning away from lying, stealing, cheating, immorality, cursing, drunkenness, and the other so-called glaring *sins of the sinful nature*. But the change is also turning away from *the silent sins of the spirit* such as self-centredness, selfishness, envy, bitterness, pride, anger, covetousness, evil thoughts, hopelessness, laziness, jealousy, lust.

1. Repentance involves two turns. There is a negative turn away from sin and a positive turn toward God. It is a turning to God and away from sin, whether sins of thought or action.
2. Repentance is more than sorrow. Sorrow may or may not be involved in repentance. A person may repent simply because he wills and acts to change; or a person may repent because he senses an agonizing sorrow within. But the sense or feeling of sorrow is not repentance. Repentance is both the change of mind and the actual turning of one’s life away from sin and toward God. □

MATHEW 03:11 THE BAPTISM OF JESUS AND JOHN

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Mathew 3:11

The word baptism (baptizein) means to dip, to immerse, to submerge, to place into. John’s baptism was with water, but Jesus’ baptism was “with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

1. John’s baptism was both a preparation and a symbol of the spiritual baptism that Jesus was to bring. John’s water baptism meant two things.
 - a. It symbolized cleansing from all sin. A person was being prepared for the cleansing that Christ would provide.
 - b. It symbolized separation or dedication. A person was setting his life apart to God in a renewed spirit of dedication. He was committing himself to the Christ about whom John was preaching.

Note: John's baptism is called "the baptism of repentance"; that is, the person who repented was baptized. There could be no question; it was understood: if a person repented and actually turned to the Lord, he was baptized.

2. Jesus' spiritual baptism was a double baptism. (Only one preposition is used in the Greek for "the Holy Spirit and with fire," the preposition "in.")
 - a. Jesus baptizes the person *in the Spirit*. He dips, immerses, and places the person in the Spirit. Whereas the person was carnal and materialistically minded, he now becomes spiritually minded (Rom. 8:5-7). The Jews had looked and longed for the day when the Spirit would come. The prophets had predicted His coming time and again. Therefore, the people knew exactly what John was predicting. The Spirit was expected to awaken and excite the people to such a degree that they would mobilize behind the Messiah, following Him in the overthrow of all oppressors. The Spirit was to lead the people in freeing Israel and establishing it as one of the greatest nations on earth (see Eze. 36:26-27; 37:14; 39:29; Isa. 44:3; Joel 2:28).
 - b. Jesus baptizes the person *in fire*. Fire has several functions that graphically symbolize the work of Christ. It illuminates, warms, melts, burns, and utterly destroys. The difference between baptism with water and fire is the difference between an outward work and an inward work. Water only cleanses the outside; fire purifies within, that is, the heart. Jesus Christ separates a person from his former life and purifies him within by the fire of His Spirit. It should be noted that in John's mind the "baptism of fire" meant that the Messiah was to destroy the enemies of Israel. It was "the messianic fire of judgment" that was to come from the throne of David. □

IV. *Luke 03:04-06 Prepare the Way for the Lord*

John was a man who cried out apocalyptically: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him" (See *Roads*, Mk. 1:3). John warned the people and he quoted Isaiah 40:3-5 as his authority. He took the points Isaiah had made and proclaimed them to the people.

1. Prepare, for the humbled shall be exalted. Every valley (the humble believers of the earth) shall be filled, that is, received, enriched, raised up, and exalted.
2. Prepare, for the proud shall be made low — cut down, leveled down. Every mountain and hill shall be made low. The mountains and hills would be the great and the less great, the self-sufficient and the self-confident, the prideful and the boastful, the conceited and the arrogant. They shall lose everything they have and be brought low. They shall be made as the dust of the earth if they do not repent.
3. Prepare, for the crooked roads shall be straightened. The crooked thief and businessman, the crooked husband and wife, the crooked student and professor — all

the crooked sinners of the earth who are bent out of shape — all who repent shall be made straight by the Messiah.

4. Prepare, for the rough ways shall be made smooth. All the rough ways of the earth — the ways of hopelessness, helplessness, loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, guilt, shame, sin, death, false religion, and empty worship — all shall be made smooth. The way to life and peace shall be planed, made level, and easy to reach.
5. God's salvation shall be seen by all mankind. Not only the Jews, but all people shall see the Messiah, God's salvation to the world. When the way is prepared, the Saviour will appear.

John's preaching aroused thousands. It woke them and stirred them to prepare and to look for the Messiah. Apparently, it was the multitude who listened to John who eventually became the followers of Christ. It was also the same multitude who created the excitement needed to spread the news of the Messiah's coming.

Amos 4:12 Prepare to meet your God, O Israel.

Hosea 10:12 Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you.

Joel 2:12-13 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.

2 Tim 2:20-21 In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanses himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.

Mark 13:35 "Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back — whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn." ■

MARK 01:03 ROADS — PREPARE

This is a graphic scene. In ancient days, most roads were hardly more than dusty paths. When a king was about to visit a certain place, a runner would run some distance ahead of the king and shout, "Prepare! The king is coming." And the people would immediately begin to clean and level the road for the coming king. John was saying, "I am but a voice calling: 'Make ready! Prepare! The King is coming!'" □