

COURIER OF THE KING

Luke 3:1-9

"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 tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.³ He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight!⁵ Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low; the crooked will become straight, the rough ways smooth,⁶ and everyone will see the salvation of God.⁷ He then said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?'⁸ Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones!⁹ Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

INTRODUCTION

In honor of Valentine's Day this past Wednesday, I share this story. A young man named John received a parrot as a gift from a recently deceased uncle. John hoped he could train the parrot to say, "The Queen is coming" and a few love phrases to welcome the return of his beloved wife, who was visiting her parents in a distant state. But this parrot had a bad attitude and an even worse vocabulary. Every word out of its mouth was obnoxious or laced with profanity. John tried and tried to change the bird's behavior by consistently speaking only kind words to it, playing soft music & hymns, or doing anything else he could think of to "clean up" the bird's vocabulary. "Don't you understand?" John told the parrot. "The Queen is coming. You must be ready to speak loving words to her when she returns." This ornery parrot merely repeated mockingly, "The Queen is coming. The Queen is coming." Finally, John was fed up. He yelled at the parrot. The parrot yelled back. John shook the parrot. The parrot got angrier and even ruder. John then threw up his hands, grabbed the bird, and, in an act of desperation, put it in the freezer hoping this might cool its temper. For a few minutes the parrot squawked, and kicked, and screamed. Then suddenly there was total quiet. Not a peep was heard for over a minute. Fearing he'd hurt the parrot or he might be dying, John quickly opened the door to the freezer. The parrot calmly stepped onto John's outstretched hand and said, "I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and actions. I'm sincerely remorseful for my inappropriate transgressions. I fully intend to do everything I can to correct my rude and unforgivable behavior." John was stunned at the change in the bird's attitude. He was about to ask what had made such a dramatic change in its behavior when the parrot asked, "May I ask what the turkey said to the Queen?"

Luke began his Gospel with the record of the miraculous events associated with the birth of John, son of the godly and aged couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel announced to them that "John" (whose name means, "God is gracious") would be commissioned by God to "'go before Him [Christ, the LORD's Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people'" (**Luke 1:5-17**). Luke then furnished details of **Jesus'** virgin birth in Bethlehem celebrated by angels and shepherds, His circumcision as an infant and redemption as a firstborn son of Israel, His fully normal childhood in Nazareth, and His attendance of the Passover Festival in Jerusalem at age 12, when **Jesus** announces to His parents He's now aware God is His true "father"; not Joseph. Luke closes his account of **Jesus'** birth and childhood with these words of **Luke 2:52**: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people." Last week's sermon, "The Boy Jesus Coming of Age," pointed out what Luke meant by these words: **Jesus** applies Himself physically, mentally, spiritually, and socially to be fully ready for His mission on earth as God's Messiah and our Savior.

If we describe **Jesus'** earthly life as a dramatic play, **Luke 2:52** is the end of Act One, when the curtain closes on His infancy and youth. At least 18 years pass until we learn from **Luke 3:23**, "As He began His ministry, Jesus was about 30 years old." We might like to know more of what **Jesus** experienced during these intervening years. We can trust that our Heavenly Father revealed all we need to know to embrace Him as our "Savior, who is Christ the Lord," as an angel announced the night of His birth (**Luke 2:8-10**). Before the adult **Jesus** steps again onto the stage of Luke's narrative, Luke must first draw our attention to the person known to history as John the Baptist. We focus today on John's Mission and John's Message.

I. JOHN'S MISSION

To Luke, the emergence of John the Baptist onto the public stage is one of the hinges on which all world history turns. John's ministry is so pivotal that Luke, always a thorough historian, who "carefully investigated everything from the very first, to write . . . an orderly sequence" of the events concerning **Jesus Christ (Luke 1:1-3)**, dates its beginning in six different ways.

1) "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar." Augustus Caesar (63 B. C. - 14 A. D.) ruled the Roman Empire from January of 27 B. C. until his death in August of 14 A.D. This would set the "fifteenth year of the reign" of his son-in-law, "Tiberius," at A.D. 28-29. Yet, Augustus elevated Tiberius as co-ruler of the Empire in A. D. 12. Other factors complicate dating the 15th year. Historians place it somewhere between A. D. 26-29. The next three dates are connected with the political organization of Palestine.

2) "while Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea." Upon his death in 4 B. C., Herod the Great divided his kingdom between his three sons. To Archelaus (**Matthew 2:19-22**) were left Judea, Samaria, and Edom, but his excessively brutal and ineffective rule drove the Jews to petition Rome for his removal. Augustus granted their request by installing a "prefect" or governor in his place, which effectively gave Rome direct control over Judea. Pilate served as the 5th "governor" of Judea, from A. D. 26 to 36.

3) "Herod was tetrarch of Galilee." Herod Antipas ruled over the regions of Galilee and Perea (east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea) from 4 B. C. until his banishment by Rome in A.D. 39. **Jesus'** earthly life fell almost entirely within the reign and the lands of Herod Antipas.

4) "his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis." Herod Philip ruled over lands north and east of Galilee from 4. B. C. until his death in A.D. 33 or 34. Caesarea Philippi, the capital city he built 25 miles northeast of Galilee, was named for him.

5) "and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene." Abilene was about 25 miles north of Damascus in modern Lebanon. Having placed John's ministry within the context of the political climate in lands once ruled by Kings David and Solomon, Luke turns to the religious situation and dates John's emergence,

6) "during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas." Annas was officially Israel's High Priest A. D. 6-15. A High Priest traditionally remained in office until his death (**Numbers 35:25**). In the government God founded for Israel, the High Priest served as the religious *and* civil ruler. After the Roman Empire assumed control of Israel in 63 B. C., Rome claimed the right to install and remove the High Priest to make him a tool of political control. Between 37 B. C. and 26 A.D., there were 28 different High Priests! A top Roman official removed Annas as High Priest in A. D. 15, but five of his sons succeeded him, as did his son-in-law, Caiaphas, appointed High Priest in A. D. 18 by the Roman governor preceding Pilate. Caiaphas remained High Priest until A. D. 36, throughout **Jesus'** public ministry and crucifixion, but many religious leaders continued to regard, "Annas [as] the high priest" (**Acts 4:6**). This is why, **Jesus**, on the night of His arrest, was brought to "Annas first" for judgment before "Caiaphas" (**John 18:12-13, 19-24**).

For centuries, skeptics cited Luke's reference to "Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene" to attack the Bible's accuracy. The only reference to Lysanias outside the Bible was made by the Jewish 1st-century historian, Josephus. He records a Lysanias became ruler over lands north of Israel in 40 B.C., but was put to death by Marc Anthony in 36 B. C., over 50 years prior to John's ministry. Then, in 1737, an inscription in rock found in the ruins of an ancient temple west of Damascus confirmed that a "Lysanias" ruled over this area from A. D. 14-29. Thus, Luke's inclusion of a ruler of which little else is known today certifies his extreme accuracy as an historian. Atheists and others skeptical of the Bible often claim of Christ's followers, "You

have faith and we have facts." Luke would reply to them, were he alive today, "If you would take as much time as I did to get your facts straight, you would realize our faith is built solidly upon facts."

Despite Luke's attention to historical accuracy, we cannot be more precise of the date when John began his ministry than somewhere between A. D. 26-29. There are too many overlapping events. But the precision of Luke's next words are awe-inspiring. Luke uses language for the Courier of the King applied to no one else in the New Testament: "*God's word came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.*" Similar phrasing in the Old Testament is used exclusively of those the LORD singled out as His prophets, as He did Samuel over a thousand years before John's birth. **I Samuel 3:1b & 21** (ESV) tells us: "And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision.²¹ And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD."

Vss. 4-6 cite **Isaiah 40:3-5**: "as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make His paths straight!⁵ Every valley will be filled, and every mountain and hill will be made low; the crooked will become straight, the rough ways smooth,⁶ and everyone will see the salvation of God." In Biblical times, whenever a King proposed a tour of his dominions, he sent a courier before him to tell the people to prepare the roadways for his coming and to prepare themselves for his inspection. As Courier of the King of Heaven, John insists that we "prepare the way for the Lord" by humbly removing obstacles blocking His access into our hearts and lives (like prideful self-righteousness). We can "make His paths straight" by calling upon God to fix our "crooked" detours from the pathway of God's will that He laid down in Scripture for us to follow.

II. JOHN'S MESSAGE

We've all heard "good news, bad news" jokes. Like the gallery owner who told an artist, "I have some good news and some bad news for you." The artist asked, "What's the good news?" "The good news," said the gallery owner, "is that a man came in here today asking if the price of your paintings would go up after you die. When I told him they would he bought every one of your paintings." "That's great news!" the artist said. "So what's the bad news?" "The bad news is that man was your doctor!"

The Greek word translated "gospel" in the New Testament literally means "good news." The "good news" of the Gospel is God's offer to forgive our sins and adopt us eternally into His Heavenly family on the basis of **Jesus'** sacrificial death, burial, resurrection, and ascension in our behalf. **Luke 3:18** (NASB) reveals John included the "good news" of Gospel in his preaching: "So with many other exhortations he preached the gospel to the people." But John's preaching first amplified the crucial condition of repentance for anyone seeking to benefit by the Gospel. In other words, we have to believe the "bad news"—unless we abandon our sinful ways God's judgment will surely condemn us—before we are candidates to receive the blessings of God's "good news."

Vs. 3: "He went into all the vicinity of the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John was not offering them "baptism" to gain "forgiveness of sins." He commanded them to be baptized as an outward act to symbolize their inward repentance upon which their "forgiveness of sins" depended. The Greek word for "repentance" combines the ideas of "time" and "a change of thinking." New Testament "repentance" means "to perceive the need to amend one's former ways; to make a change for the better." At the time of John's birth, Gentiles were considered so unclean they were required to be baptized as a public confession of their need of repentance and total cleansing before Israel's God could accept them. By "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins," John startled Jews by declaring that they, too, despite being "children of Abraham," were in such need of cleansing they were also in danger of judgment! John required them to be baptized as a public confession of their repentance; their acceptance of their own desperate need to receive "forgiveness of sins."

Vss. 7-9: "He then said to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, 'Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?' ⁸ Therefore produce fruit consistent with repentance. And don't start saying to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our father," for I tell you that God is able to raise up children for Abraham from these stones! ⁹ Even now the ax is ready to strike the root of the trees! Therefore, every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." John insists a confession of inward repentance must be confirmed by an outward demonstration of repentance. John gives us graphic warning that without evidence of "fruit consistent with repentance," of actions verifying we have turned from what is ungodly in our lives, we have no guarantee we are safe in the arms of **Jesus**. We may still be scheduled to "be cut down and thrown into the fire" of God's judgment, regardless of what privileges or past associations with God we are relying upon to escape "the coming wrath"! As "a prophet of the Most High" (**Luke 1:76**), John serves **Jesus** in the role of Israel's finest prophets calling for repentance.

CONCLUSION

Chuck Norris (b. 1940), the famed martial arts fighter, responded to the good news of the Gospel by coming forward at a Billy Graham crusade at age 12. But he never truly repented more than superficially, and, therefore, never really committed himself to serving Christ. He went on to become the karate middle-weight champion of the world for eight straight years. His first movie roles, naturally, were in karate films. In the 1972 movie, *Way of the Dragon*, Norris appears as the nemesis of Bruce Lee, with whom he'd earlier trained for two years. After a variety of movie roles and becoming a successful author, he starred in the hit TV series *Walker, Texas Ranger* from 1993-2001, which made him a household name. Chuck Norris was successful in almost every area of his life. But he lacked a true relationship with the Lord. He served our country honorably in the Air Force from 1958-62. Chuck Norris was a good man in many ways. But he fathered a daughter by an extramarital affair, in 1963. He then divorced his wife of 30 years in 1988.

On November 28, 1998, he married former model Gena O'Kelley, 23 years his junior. She delivered twins on August 30, 2001. One day, he came home from filming and saw Gina reading the Bible. He asked, "You're not getting religious on me, are you?" She replied, "This is good stuff! You should read this." He sat on the couch and began reading the Bible with her. The more he read in coming weeks, the more God's Spirit, in his own words, started "working him over." God made it clear to him, "You need to come back to Christ. You need to finish what you started when you were 12 years old! You need to make Him the Lord of your life."

Not until then did Chuck Norris admit how desperately he needed a Savior and to repent deeply of his sins. He finally believed the "bad news" that made him a true candidate for the Gospel's "good news." He then truly surrendered himself to Christ and **Jesus** transformed his life. This change was immediately reflected by the much stronger emphasis on faith in Christ seen in the final two seasons of *Walker, Texas Ranger*. Since this show ended, Norris and his wife have been involved in many ministries, including the Billy Graham Association and the Make a Wish foundation. He also began the Kickstart program, which ministers to at risk students in junior high schools across America. Chuck Norris is the author of Christian-themed books, has been in TV commercials promoting Bible study and prayer in public schools. He is involved in efforts to reduce drug use, and he openly promotes Intelligent Design and Biblical creationism. In other words, Chuck Norris for these past 20 years has "produced fruit consistent with repentance"!