

THE REAL JESUS: WHO'S WHO

Week Four | April 29, 2018 | Meet John the Baptist

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Before your group meets next time, spend some time alone in God's Word reading through this week's text, Luke 3:1–21. Pray that God, through His Spirit, would bring to life the truth of this text and how it applies to your life.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Forgiveness of sins comes through repentance.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Repentance is what happens when the Holy Spirit reveals who we really are and who Jesus really is. Repentance is what separates genuine Christians from the hypocrites or the hostile.

MEDITATE

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight'" (Luke 3:4).

GETTING STARTED

+ Use this section to prepare your heart and mind for the truths of this week. This section will help to introduce the focus of this week's lesson.

Q: *Read this passage about John the Baptist and see if you can guess where it comes from:*

“John, that was called the Baptist...was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism...Herod, who feared the great influence John had over the people...sent [John] a prisoner, out of Herod’s suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death.”

At first glance this passage seems like it comes straight out of the New Testament, right? Believe it or not, it comes from a first-century history book! The works of Jewish historian, Josephus, serve as some of the most crucial sources for trustworthy information about the Roman Empire and late Temple Judaism, the historical context in which Jesus lived. For two thousand years scholars have studied his works in order to understand this era of history. His accounts are full of valuable details and authentic sources that did not survive in any other records. He provides comprehensive information on political leaders of the time as well as the cultural climate, religious tensions, and economic conditions. When it comes to reliable historical documents, Josephus is among the best.

Look back at the passage. Notice that this historian, who had no interest in promoting a myth or a legend, confirms for us that John the Baptist was a real person. He gives basic facts about him that perfectly correspond with the gospel accounts, particularly the gospel of Luke. And this is just one of several mentions of John the Baptist by Josephus!

Josephus gives precise historical facts about John the Baptist, but he doesn’t quite get the theology right. In his account of John’s ministry of baptism he says, “For immersion in water, it was clear to him, could not be used for the forgiveness of sins, but as a sanctification of the body, and only if the soul was already thoroughly purified by right actions.” Josephus was not a Christian. While he seems genuinely intrigued, it’s clear he didn’t really get John’s message. As we discussed in week 2, while the history authenticates the Biblical witness, Luke shows us that encountering the “real Jesus” requires historical accuracy and theological depth. To understand John’s ministry and message, you have to understand the one he points to, the Messiah.

Q: *What strikes you the most about the way Josephus describes John the Baptist?*

Q: *How do you think the historical reliability of John the Baptist strengthens the historical reliability of Jesus?*

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Today we will meet John the Baptist by examining Luke's account of his context, his ministry, and the two responses people had to him. We will see that the gospel of Luke historically corresponds with Josephus' account, though it connects John the Baptist's message with the broader message of Scripture, providing theological depth to historical accuracy. As we get to know John better, he points us to the real Jesus.

1. JOHN'S CONTEXT

2. JOHN'S MINISTRY

3. JOHN PREACHES THE REAL JESUS

GOING DEEPER

+ *This next section will help show what God's Word says about this week's particular focus. Read through the Scripture passages and connect the text to this week's biblical truth.*

JOHN'S CONTEXT

■ LUKE 3:1-2

Q: *Have you ever been in a dark season of life where it feels like you cannot see the light at the end of the tunnel?*

Q: *When you feel you are in a hopeless situation, what doubts do you struggle with?*

It was the worst of times, says Luke the historian. The government was run by tyrants and cronies. First, there was Tiberius Caesar, who was the ruler of the empire. Under him was Pontius Pilate, a governor. Beneath Pilate were

three tetrarchs: Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. The Jewish temple was run by two high priests whose main concern was maintaining their positions of power. You may recognize some of these names. They had a lot to do not only with John the Baptist's death, but Jesus's death as well. These were some of the biggest villains of the age, and they had complete control. It turns out, Luke's historical facts are spot on. But it was when things seemed the most bleak that God began a new thing, the ministry of John the Baptist. In verse 2, Luke says that it was in the midst of these circumstances that "the word of God came to John." We always know something really good is about to happen when God's word shows up.

The Roman government existed to tax. They conquered a new territory and made it a Roman province as a way to raise revenue for the empire. The tax collectors were corrupt and frequently over-charged the people, lining their own pockets with the surplus. The Jewish people were taken advantage of and cheated. They viewed the Romans as enemy occupants who had invaded their land.

Looking at the Old Testament promises of a Redeemer who would come and establish the kingdom of God on earth, they envisioned a conquering hero who would overthrow the Roman government and establish a Jewish theocracy. They weren't really thinking about things like repentance of sin and a Messiah who would usher in a kingdom by dying on a cross. They never imagined God's plan would be to win by losing. They did not see their sin as the greatest problem. They saw the Romans' sin as the greatest problem! They did not see how God was offended by their false religiosity and law-breaking hearts. They only saw how He was offended by the Roman exploitation of them! But God had a different plan of redemption in mind, and He signaled the first act of that plan with the ministry of John the Baptist.

The good news for us is no matter how bleak our circumstances or how wrong our understanding, God stands above it all. He can break through the darkness and hopelessness in ways we never could have expected. As Paul says in Ephesians 3:20–21, He is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think and He does it all for His glory! What is to come is most certainly far more incredible than anyone could have imagined.

Q: *Think back to a time in your life when you expected God to redeem, or bring good out of a trial, one way and He ended up doing it in a way you never could have expected.*

Q: *What is your current situation or circumstance? Is it bleak? Do you feel powerless?*

JOHN'S MINISTRY

LUKE 3:3-14

Q: *How did John prepare the way for Jesus?*

Q: *Why do you think he called people to repent? How is repentance the best way to prepare for Jesus?*

Q: *What does it mean to "bear fruits in keeping with repentance?"*

The purpose of John's ministry was similar to the function of a herald who goes before the King, announcing to everyone that he is coming. When people hear the herald's announcement, they prepare for the coming of the king. Perhaps they stop what they are doing, make sure they are dressed appropriately, and stand respectfully as they eagerly await His arrival. John was called to be a herald because the time had finally come when God would fulfill the promise He made back in Genesis 3:15 to redeem the world broken by sin and death. Centuries had passed, and God had sent prophets to remind the Israelites of His promise, encouraging them to continue hoping in the One to come. And now, the Messiah has come. John the Baptist is sent ahead of Him to tell the people to make way for the King by making their hearts ready.

John tells people to repent of their sin and be baptized. This does not mean forgiveness of sin came through John's baptism. John's baptism wasn't magical; it was an outward sign of inward repentance. Josephus understood this to some degree. In the passage page 35, we see that he recognized that baptism was a reflection of an inner cleansing. What he didn't get right was the repentance part. Forgiveness of sins does not come from right behavior that tips the scales, putting you "in the green." Forgiveness of sins comes when you recognize you are a sinner and acknowledge you could never stand before a holy God. Repentance happens when you see how big, holy, and worthy God is and how small, unclean, and unworthy you are. Before you can be given new life, you must die to the old one.

The Spirit of God spoke powerfully through John and brought many to repentance. As John spoke, they saw their sin, and they saw a holy God who would forgive the sin of those who confess and seek forgiveness. The Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, had come into the world. He would atone for sin (pay the penalty of it) so forgiveness would be open to whomever sought it.

The call to repentance was a sign of the kind of Messiah Jesus was. He did not come into the world the first time to conquer by overthrowing the government. He came to conquer by overthrowing the power of sin and death. The way to be in right standing with this Messiah is not to prepare yourself as a worthy warrior, but as a repentant sinner.

Repentance itself is evidence of God's grace. Kent Hughes says, "Repentance is the telltale mark of the grace of God at work in our lives. Saving faith and true repentance are always found together." The fact that so many people came to repentance is evidence that God's Spirit was moving and His grace was abounding. It is not through our own effort, wisdom, or insight that we are able to see our sin, but only through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. It is important for us to examine our hearts in light of this truth. Are we known as a community of people who continually practice repentance? Or are we known as those who have it so together they don't have to repent that often? A spirit of repentance is the clearest indicator that you truly are a Christian. An ever-growing distaste for sin and frequent trips to the cross are signs of Christian maturity, not immaturity. As John shows us through his heralding of the Messiah, repentance is the highway to God.

In verse 7, we see that while many responded in repentance, others did not. They may have refused true repentance by practicing false repentance, going through the motions just to follow the crowd. False repentance is an outward show without a genuine change of heart. It creates hypocrites, inauthentic people. Before long, they will be found out because, as Jesus says in Matthew 7, a tree is recognized by its fruit. If a tree is diseased on the inside, the fruit that grows from it will be as well.

In verse 8, John indicates that some refused to repent of sin because they saw themselves as already "in the green" with God. As direct descendants of Abraham, they considered themselves part of an ethnic and religious elite. John called out the lie that a connection with righteous people would somehow make them righteous as well. This is a powerful truth for us to reflect on as well. Coming from the most wonderful Christian family may be a great blessing, but it won't help us when we each stand before God. We may be members of a church and actively participate. But rubbing shoulders with other Christians does not make us one. We may be able to fool family members or church members, but according to John, we cannot fool God.

Q: *Examine your own heart. Are you a frequently repenting sinner or do you find yourself only in need of occasional repentance? When you see your sin do you*

“course correct” and move on or do you repent of it?

- ♀: *Do you find yourself going to the cross in repentance more often or less often the longer you are a Christian?*
- ♀: *Think of a time when you experienced genuine remorse over your sin and repented. Describe what that was like. Then think of how it felt when you received God’s forgiveness. Describe what that was like.*
- ♀: *Are there any ways you are practicing on the outside what is not real on the inside? Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal them to you. Or, has God revealed a sin to you that you have not repented of yet?*
- ♀: *Robert Murray M’Cheyne once said, “For every one look at self, take ten looks at Christ!” Discuss what this means in the context of repentance and forgiveness.*

JOHN PREACHES THE REAL JESUS

☐ LUKE 3:15–20

- ♀: *What did people start to wonder in verse 15?*
- ♀: *How did John say he was not who they thought?*

Jesus is a real man, says John, not a nice idea or a mythical figure. He is actually coming, and He is much greater than John. This Messiah is so real that He will be wearing a pair of sandals, just like everyone else! His saving power will be as real as His coming. John tells the people that his baptism was only a foretaste of what is to come. True baptism includes the gift of God’s presence within the heart of each person who repents of their sins and trusts in Christ. When that happens, the Holy Spirit will come and dwell inside of them.

This idea would have been mind-blowing for the Jewish people. All through the Old Testament God’s presence was

with them, but it always dwelled in the Ark of the Covenant or the temple. It was never inside them! God had always promised that one day He would take hearts of stone and turn them into hearts of flesh, but they never imagined it would be by having the very presence of God Himself living in the hearts of people. They were so busy trying to build their own temple and set up their own theocracy that they never imagined that God's plan was so much bigger and better. He would make His home—establish His temple—in the hearts of His redeemed children. John's call to repentance and baptism was just a sign of what is to come. It was only meant to herald the coming of the Promised One and call the people to prepare themselves for what God was about to do. For John, the miracle of Jesus was that He was real, and after over two thousand years of waiting, redemption was really happening.

Finally, in verses 19–20, Herod decided that John was preaching too much truth. John had confronted Herod about the sin of adultery. He spoke truth to power. But instead of repenting, Herod hardened his heart and elected to protect himself by putting John in jail. He determined he didn't need a savior, and he certainly didn't need to ask for forgiveness. By God's grace, may we not be like Herod who heard the word of God and silenced it. Instead, may we be like the people in verses 10–12 who responded by saying, "What then shall we do?"

🔗: *Look back at verses 1–20. What fruit do you see mentioned in all the people that accurately reveals what is going on in their hearts?*

🔗: *Now that we have studied this passage, look back over it and discuss how both historical accuracy and theological depth bring it to life.*

NEXT STEPS

+ *Connect the truths from God's Word to your daily life. Process how what you've learned this week will impact the way you live beyond today and into the future.*

🔗: *As we go through this study, what can you do to prepare your heart to encounter the "real Jesus?"*

🔗: *As Christians, we know we are not the Savior, but we are called to be heralds of the Savior. How does thinking about yourself as a herald of Jesus encourage you*

as you live out your faith and share it with others?

Q: *How can you grow in your practice of repentance? How do you think you can include your community in that practice?*

PRAY

+ *Use these prayer points to connect your time in prayer to this week's focus.*

- Father, thank You for being a promise-keeping God who works in ways we never could have imagined or anticipated. Give me grace to trust You, even when things seem hopeless from my perspective.
- Holy Spirit, I know it is only by Your grace that I can see my sin. I pray You would reveal it to me. I pray I would be sensitive to Your voice and quick to repent.
- Jesus, thank You for the cross. Thank You that I can come boldly before the throne of grace because of what You did for me. Thank You that You are real and that my forgiveness is too.

COMMENTARY

LUKE 3:1 The fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar is probably around A.D. 29. All of these names and titles are confirmed as being historically accurate by records outside of the Bible.

LUKE 3:2 The word of God comes to John, which means that John is a prophet in the order of the Old Testament prophets. The word of God had not come to be publically proclaimed by any prophet since Malachi (around 460 B.C.). That means that God was silent for nearly five hundred years. This is another reason John's ministry was a brilliant light in the midst of darkness.

LUKE 3:7 By calling them vipers, John drew their attention back to the serpent in the garden. By associating them with him, John was saying they had become the seed of the serpent, or children of Satan (see Ephesians 2).

LUKE 3:17 This verse refers to the final judgment when God will separate the grain from the chaff (Matthew 3:12).

**All exegetical content and commentary resourcing for this lesson was provided by the ESV Study Bible Commentary Notes, Christ Centered Exposition (Luke), and Kent Hughes' Preaching the Word (Luke).*