



# LUKE

## A PROMISE KEPT

A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS | LUKE 3:1-20

1. How does John describe the fruit of repentance?
2. Why do you think John describes social concern as the heart of true repentance?
3. What happens when we pursue social justice as more of a trendy political response than the fruit of genuinely repentant heart?

### THE MORE POWERFUL ONE (vv. 15-18)

*<sup>15</sup> The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. <sup>16</sup> John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>17</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” <sup>18</sup> And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.*

1. How does John describe the major difference between himself and the one who is to come?
2. How is Jesus more powerful than John?
3. How does the power of Jesus operate in our lives to accomplish God’s redemptive purposes?
4. What happens when we pursue God in our power rather than leaning into and relying on his power?

Few New Testament characters capture our imagination in quite the same way as John the Baptist does. Matthew goes out of his way to describe his appearance and dietary conventions. “John’s clothes,” he tells us, “were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4).” John would be hard to miss in any crowd, ancient or modern. If he were to invite you to dinner, you might want to have a back up plan firmly in place, unless of course, you’ve developed a taste for locust and wild honey.

John, however, is distinguished by far more than his fashion sense and dining habits. He has the straight forward style of an Old Testament prophet. On the grace to truth spectrum, you will always get a healthy dose of hard truth from John—especially if you were a member of the Jewish ruling class or the Herod family.

We’ve already witnessed the announcement of John’s birth, and his circumcision. The angel Gabriel and John’s father Zechariah have set the expectations for the role he will play in God’s redemptive plan. John is a transitional figure who will carry the story forward from the Old Testament to the New—from the hopeful anticipation of the prophets to fulfillment of God’s promises in the coming of the Messiah.

### JOHN IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT (vv. 1-3)

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene—<sup>2</sup> during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. <sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

1. Luke introduces John in a fashion similar to the way the Old Testament prophets are introduced.

*JEREMIAH 1:1–3 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile.*

He describes the emperor, the governor and the regional head of state. He also describes the Jewish ruling class—Caiaphas and Anna. Some of these characters will play an important role in the narrative to come, others will quickly pass from the scene. While the Old Testament prophets are always described in their relationship to Israel, Luke describes John in his relationship to the entire Roman world.

- a. How is Luke’s introduction to John similar to the introduction of Jeremiah that we find in the book of Jeremiah (see also Isaiah 1:1 and Hosea 1:1)?
  - b. While Jeremiah is described in his relationship to Judah and Israel, John is described in his relationship to the Roman world. Why do you think Luke emphasizes John’s relationship to the broader world scene?
2. John’s baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. His message is not all that different from that of Jesus and the message entrusted to us (see Luke 24:45-46). In the Old Testament repentance describes turning from a devotion to idols to the true and living God. Paul captures the the Old Testament ideal in his first letter to the believers in Thessalonica, “you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). In the New Testament the word used to describe repentance is a change of heart and mind.
    - a. How would you describe the nature of true repentance?
    - b. What is the relationship between repentance and the forgiveness of sin?
    - c. How does the call for repentance challenge the way we so often share the gospel?

#### **JOHN IN PROPHETIC CONTEXT (vv. 4-6)**

*<sup>4</sup>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 for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ <sup>5</sup>Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. <sup>6</sup>And all people will see God’s salvation.’ ”*

1. The wilderness was, in a very real sense, the place where Israel was formed. Moses recalls the wilderness years in a solemn warning:

*“Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. <sup>3</sup>He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.<sup>c</sup> <sup>4</sup>Your clothes did not wear out and your feet did not swell during these forty years. <sup>5</sup>Know then in your heart that as a man disciplines his son, so the Lord your God disciplines you. (Deuteronomy 8:2-5).”*

The Call to the wilderness is a call back to the beginning.

- a. Why does Israel need a new beginning?
  - b. When and why might we need a new beginning?
  - c. What would going back to the beginning look like for us?
2. Isaiah’s prophecy describes the construction of a super highway — “every mountain is leveled and every valley filled in.”

What are the steps we need to take to grant easy access for our Lord to enter our hearts and lives?

#### **THE HEART OF JOHN’S MESSAGE (vv. 7-14)**

*<sup>7</sup>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? <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>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.” <sup>10</sup>“What should we do then?” the crowd asked. <sup>11</sup>John answered, “Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.” <sup>12</sup>Even tax collectors came to be baptized. “Teacher,” they asked, “what should we do?” <sup>13</sup>“Don’t collect any more than you are required to,” he told them. <sup>14</sup>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.”*

John has already made a vital connection between repentance and forgiveness, now he makes a vital connection between repentance and fruit. His message is in complete sync with the Apostle Paul, who declared: “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven... I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds (Acts 26:19-21).”