

CAN WE HOPE TO START OUR LIVES OVER?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

by Ron Ritchie

We had a wonderful experience in our Couples' Class on Sunday last. One of our young couples taught the class, and afterwards an older gentleman told the husband that he enjoyed what he had shared from his life and from the Word of God. He had been coming to our services for the last few months, he said. Observing the people with whom he interacted, he shared, he had become interested in the Christian experience people were having at our church.

The conversation revealed that, like most of us, the older man's life had much failure, fear, and that he was facing some serious medical problems. When the younger man asked if he were a Christian, he replied no. He said that he could not understand the place that Jesus had in the Trinity. As the two men discussed the cross of Christ, the older man admitted that he was a sinner, but thought he was "getting better." They went on to talk about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and its implications for his life. The younger man shared that by repenting of his sins and acknowledging Jesus as his personal Lord and Savior he would become "born again" to a new, eternal life in Christ. His sins would be forgiven, and he would receive the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit to cope with his present realities. He would be a new creature, with a new mind and a new heart, and could start his life over. The new life would not be a rebuilt old life, but a new life in Jesus.

When the younger man asked if he would like to begin a new life in Christ, the man said, "Yes, but I don't know how to do it." My young friend said, "I know how to introduce you to Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Let's pray." According to John 3:1-17, the older man was "born again" one week ago. Chronologically, he is over 70-years-old, but spiritually, he is seven days old. He is a child of God now, an old man with a new life and a new direction for living.

Can we hope to start our lives over? Is there a second chance for life on earth? Today, in our studies in the gospel of Luke, we will discover a resoundingly positive two-part answer to this question. Here is the first answer:

I. Yes! If We Know Where We Are! Luke 3:1-14

Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every ravine shall be filled up, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough roads smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

He therefore began saying to the multitudes who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And also the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the multitudes were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" And he would answer and say to them, "Let the man who

has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise." And some tax-gatherers also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." And some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."

Approximately 18 years had passed since Mary and Joseph found their "lost" 12-year-old son Jesus in the temple going about "his Father's business." During the years after their return to Nazareth, Luke says, "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (2:52). At the same time Luke writes that our Lord's cousin, John ". . . continued to grow and to become strong in spirit, and he lived in the deserts until the day of his public appearance to Israel" (1:80). Our passage deals with John the Baptist, the forerunner who would prepare the way for the Messiah's public appearance.

With a broad brush stroke Luke paints a picture of the cruel and political scene and the spiritually corrupt religious setting which John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus were destined to impact. In the year 29 A.D., the Roman Empire was ruled by Caesar Tiberius (14-37 A.D.). His 23-year reign was characterized by cruelty. Israel, together with the other Roman colonies, suffered under his heavy hand. The Romans divided the nation into different territories. Pontius Pilate (26-36 A.D.) was the military governor of Judea, the southern part of Israel that included the city of Jerusalem and the Temple; Herod Antipas (4-34 A.D.), whom Jesus would later call "the fox," was governor of Galilee in the north; Philip II (4-34 A.D.), son of Herod the Great and Cleopatra, was responsible for the area north of Galilee, which is now modern Syria; and Lysanias was responsible for the area north of Mount Hermon and west of Damascus. All four governors were responsible to the Roman Emperor to govern their territories under Roman law, a harsh system which produced tremendous pain and grief for the citizens of the world, especially Israel.

The religious scene in Israel was dominated by the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, who in turn were dominated by the Romans. Rome deposed the original high priest and appointed puppets to control the people. First, the ungodly Annas, who ruled from 6-15 A.D. Although the Romans eventually set him aside, Annas' legacy ruled over the Sanhedrin through his five sons and his son-in-law Caiaphas (18-36 A.D.), all of whom held this office.

In the three years of Jesus' public ministry, several of these political and religious characters would cross the paths of both John and Jesus. Luke wanted his friend Theophilus to remember how spiritually dark the world scene was before the forerunner, John the Baptist, began "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins;" and John's cousin Jesus Christ, the "Light of the World," was revealed as "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." These political and religious rulers possessed the highest authority in the land, but John and Jesus would come from a higher authority.

Verse 2 says, "the word of God came to John. . ." John was placed in a class of prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Under the direct inspiration of God, these men counseled, and at times rebuked and denounced emperors, kings, and priests, as well as the nations at large. This phrase was the formula for a prophetic message from God to be delivered to the nation of Israel, the first recorded word in some 400 years. God had used the prophets in the past to share what was in his heart. Likewise, John's purpose was to challenge rulers who had fallen out of a relationship with God, and to call his people back to himself. But, as he would later say of himself later, "I am a voice crying aloud in the wilderness" (John 1:23).

From Luke 1:1-25, we know that nearly 30 years earlier the angel Gabriel had appeared to the priest Zacharias, who was married to Elizabeth, a barren woman from a priestly family. The angel told Zacharias that his wife would conceive and give birth to a son whom they should call John. Gabriel declared that many would rejoice at his birth; he would be great in the sight of the Lord; he would become a Nazarene; he would be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb; he would turn many Jews back to the Lord their God; and he would go as a forerunner before the long-promised Messiah in the spirit and power of Elijah, "'to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children,'" and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous; so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (1:17).

John would reflect the person of Elijah, a prophet who ministered during the days of the divided kingdom of

Israel, some 800 years earlier. Elijah was a recluse who lived most of his time in the desert until he was asked by God to prophesy against the wicked kings and the nation that had forsaken God for idols. He loved and obeyed God at enormous cost to his own life, rebuking both the northern and southern kings when they lived in wickedness. Likewise, Luke compared John to the prophet Elijah. Jesus would say of John later ". . . among those born of women none is greater than John" (7:28); "he is a shining light" (John 5:35); and "more than a prophet" (Matt 11:9).

Eight days after his birth, John was named at his circumcision. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Zacharias prophesied about the position, ministry, and message of his son: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare his way; to give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, with which the sunrise from on high shall visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death" (Luke 1:76-79).

Our text continues, "And the word of God came to John in the wilderness and he came into all the district around Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." As a son of a legitimate priestly family John could have served in the temple, dressed in fine robes and belt, and eaten from the best of the meat and bread sacrifices. However, he came dressed in a camel coat, a leather belt, and had a daily diet of locusts and wild honey. He confronted the nation of Israel like a prophet of old, as God's messenger, with God's message, declaring judgment to God's people. He was essentially saying, "What you see in me and where I am from is what you are spiritually." The wilderness where John preached was a symbol of the spiritual barrenness that Israel was experiencing.

Matt. 3:4-6 says that the Jews from Jerusalem, Judea, and the district around Jordan were being baptized by John in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. He began his ministry in the area of the northern tip of the Dead Sea, around the Quraum village, and then north a few miles to the oasis city of Jericho by the shores of the Jordan River.

In Luke 3:3-6 John's message was directed to the common people. He preached "a baptism of repentance for [with a view towards] the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 3:2: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"). The Jews were used to seeing an unclean Gentile enter the waters of baptism, or the Levitical washings to restore an unclean Jew to his former condition. However, John was saying that the children of Abraham were unclean and needed preparation for an entirely new condition. This was not an offer of salvation to the people. Only the Messiah could extend that offer. Rather, his task as the forerunner was to prepare their hearts for the Messiah's arrival. The Messiah would then forgive the sins of the people and baptize them with the Holy Spirit. John's role would employ the symbol of cleansing that they understood to ready their hearts for the forgiveness of their sins. Repentance involved the expression of sorrow for sin, and then a complete turning away from it so one could receive forgiveness for sins. Entering the waters of the Jordan physically demonstrated the person's spiritual willingness to have the Messiah forgive his sins.

In verses 4-6 Luke quoted Isaiah 40 for the benefit of Theophilus. John understood his office as the prophetic "forerunner" of Isaiah 40. He knew that he was not the Messiah, but the one who would go before the Lord to prepare his way, giving his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. The heart of this prophecy was a metaphor drawn from an ancient custom. When visited by a king, a citizen could be approached to prepare a well constructed road so that the king could approach the city in dignity and honor. In its immediate context Isaiah 40 referred to the redemption which God the king brought to Israel with the return of the Jewish exiles from the Babylonian captivity. However, Zacharias prophesied that his son John would be the fulfillment of the messianic forerunner "to go on before the Lord (Yahweh incarnate in his son Jesus) to prepare his ways; to give to his people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins" (Luke 1:76-77).

In his day, Isaiah told the people that they would have to construct a road for the Lord if they were to see his glory. John's message reminded them of that same truth. If people hoped to see the salvation of God in the form of forgiveness of sins, they must first build Messiah a smooth road named "repentance." In calling the nation to repent John was functioning as an Old Testament prophet, according to the principles in Deuteronomy 28, 30. Before the blessings of Messiah could come the people would have to turn from their sins to God, and then seek his forgiveness.

John, like Isaiah, gave the people of Israel a six-fold plan to prepare their hearts for the coming king. The individual needed to repent in the following areas. First, he would have to "Make his paths straight"-men who changed God's ways and made their own paths needed to get back on the Lord's course. Second, "Every ravine shall be filled up"-the hope for the lowly was that all would be put on the same level in his kingdom. Third, "Every mountain and hill shall be brought low"-when this king came he would want to find a people of humility, without pride and lust for power. Fourth, "the crooked shall become straight"-thieves, robbers and corrupt officials would turn away from their old ways. Fifth, "rough roads, smooth"-tension and difficult situations would give way to the joy of living. And sixth, "All flesh shall see the salvation of the Lord"-as God's salvation was being offered in the coming Christ it could be seen and experienced by all who repented of their sins. If any man, woman, or child would travel down the road of humility, repentance, and confession to call upon the Lord, they would experience the salvation of the Lord.

After speaking to common people, John then turned to the Jewish leaders. Verse 7:

"He therefore began saying to the multitudes . . ." This multitude was made up of the common Jews, the hated tax collectors, and the temple soldiers, as well as the men from the religious community. The multitudes were arriving from Jerusalem, Judea, and the districts of Jordan. According to Matthew 3:7-10, in the the midst of the crowds that were coming down to the Jordan from Jerusalem, John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, and he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

According to the Law of Moses, the snake was an unclean animal that was unacceptable to God; it defiled anything it touched. John questioned the Pharisees and Sadducees as to who told them that the fire of God's pure judgment was coming to destroy them like fire to a brood of vipers. Remember, John's mind was fixed on all who were spiritually unclean and unprepared for the coming of Messiah. Anyone who refused to repent of their sins would soon suffer eternal judgment, the wrath to come, which the Jews understood would immediately proceed "the day of the Lord." In order to escape this judgment, the Sadducees had to lay aside their worldliness, and the Pharisees their self-righteousness. John perceived that these religious leaders were willing to participate in an outward baptism, but not repent of their sins because they were falsely secure in their status as children of Abraham.

The sign of spiritual repentance was the fruit of a changed life. John repudiated the teaching of the spiritual leaders that "all Jews are true Jews." In reality, all Jews were not true Jews; all Israel was not Israel. The religious Jew believed that they were under the Abrahamic Covenant. They had been circumcised on the eighth day according to the Law; thus their salvation was already assured, they felt. However, John's response was that salvation was independent of being Jewish. If God wanted children of Abraham he could speak to the rocks and they would become all that he desired in a man. Righteous trees bear righteous fruit. If there is no fruit on the branches of one's life the ax of God's righteous judgment is already laid at the root and it will be cut down and thrown into the eternal fire of judgment.

Many of the Jews within the crowd were deeply moved by John's message of hope and judgment, and were forced to ask the question, "Then what must we do?" to show their willingness to change. Water baptism was the first evidence of a sincere desire to have one's heart prepared to receive the Messiah and his gift of salvation. In Acts 19, however, we see that it was only one half of the coin. When Paul met some of John's disciples 20 years later, he realized that they had been baptized into John's baptism, but had not received the Holy Spirit. Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him" (19:4).

Speaking to the common man, John stated that the fruit of righteousness was evidenced by deeds of mercy. For example, if a person was blessed by having two coats, then he should give one to the person without. If one had his portion of daily food, but someone was without, he should share his portion. John directed the Jewish tax collector, who was hated by both Romans and Jews because he was a traitor and thief, to collect only what they had been ordered. To the soldiers, who were either God-fearing Roman Gentiles or Jewish

temple guards, he said, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."

One night a few years ago a man, who I will call "Bob," came by our home to talk to me about spiritual things. He had lost his wife and children in a divorce, and his life was empty and fruitless. We talked for awhile about his empty and enslaved life, and then I explained to him that there was hope for him in Jesus Christ. That hope rested in the fact that God loved Bob so much that his son Jesus was willing to go to the cross to die for the sins that were separating him from the love and life of God the Father. The only thing Bob needed to do in order to fully experience God's love and forgiveness was to place his faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and confess him as his Lord and Savior. When I finished, Bob stood up, thanked me for my time, and walked out into the night. I assumed that he had clearly heard the gospel, but had chosen to reject it.

Can we hope to start our lives over? Yes! If we realize who we are—sinners who need to be saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. As Paul would write later to the Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (2:8).

Can we hope to start our lives over? Here is the second part of our answer,

II. Yes! If We Give Our Lives to Jesus Luke 3: 15-20

Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he might be the Christ; John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, and I am not fit to untie the thong of his sandals; he himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire. And his winnowing fork is in his hand to clean out his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." So with many other exhortations also he preached the gospel to the people. But when Herod the tetrarch was reproved by him on account of Herodias, his brother's wife, and on account of all the wicked things which Herod had done, he added this also to them all, that he locked John up in prison.

Here was a first century hippie, the son of a priestly family, ministering not in Jerusalem but in the desert, dressed in a camel hair coat, eating locusts and honey, preaching a heretofore unheard of doctrine called a "baptism of repentance," and asking the Jewish people to prepare their hearts for the coming of the long awaited Messiah. Pharisees and Sadducees were denounced as an unclean "brood of snakes." The crowd was deeply affected spiritually as they watched the common man, the tax-collectors, and the temple soldiers take the first steps towards repentance.

There people were in a "state of expectation," wondering if John was the Messiah, the suffering servant of Isaiah 40. They were hoping that he was the political Christ who would rid Israel of its hated Roman yoke, and restore the nation to a position of power for the benefit of all mankind. There was a feeling of hope in the air, as well as a feeling of uncertainty.

John said, "As for me, I baptize you with water . . ." The prophets such as Zechariah and Jeremiah knew that God was the only one who could cleanse the nation of Israel (Zech. 13:1, Jer. 33:5). Therefore, John used the outward symbol of water baptism to show an inward reality. John's baptism was at once a preparation and a promise of the spiritual cleansing which only Messiah could accomplish for his people. John stated clearly, "No! I am not the Messiah. I am his forerunner, not even worthy to untie his sandals, but he who is coming is mightier than I am."

For the following reasons, the Messiah would overshadow John's ministry:

"He himself will baptize you in the Holy Spirit . . ." John could place people in the water, but the Messiah would place all who repented into the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit into the believer. Thus, the very life of God would be given to those who repented of their sins. John did not understand this fully, but was looking forward three years to the Day of Pentecost when Joel 2: 32,38 would be fulfilled: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your

young men will see visions."

"And with fire . . ." Fire was a symbol of cleansing and judgment. The immediate statement referred to the forgiveness of sins, removing all that is worthless, useless, and lifeless. John also was talking about an ultimate judgment of world in the final days (see II Peter 3:7, I Thess. 1:8, Joel 2: 32, Mal 3:1). Judgment would be for those who are not filled with the Holy Spirit, Gentiles and Jews alike.

"And His winnowing fork is in his hand to clean out his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." John proclaimed that the Messiah who would come after him was mightier in salvation and judgment. He challenged the people to get sober: If they received the Christ he would give them his Holy Spirit. However, if they rejected him, they would be judged like the chaff on a wheat floor, burned up (a symbol of hell). John warned the people to check their hearts because the Messiah would be able to test the hearts of the true and false believers.

I want to share what happened to "Bob". Later that night he called me to say he had accepted Jesus as Lord. He could not do it at my house, he said, because he needed to go home to clean out the pornographic movies, books, magazines that filled his house. He had placed a large trunk in the middle of his living room, threw every piece of porn from his house into the trunk, and then locked it. He then arranged for a friend to take it to the dump the next day. Bob knew that before he accepted Jesus, he needed to show the Lord that he wanted to change. Ridding himself of pornography was evidence of that heart attitude. Having repented, taking a 180 degree turn, he made his road smooth for the King to come into his heart.

At this point, Luke explained to Theophilus that John the Baptist continued to preach the gospel to the people, but in time his message would reach the heart of Herod Antipas, the governor of Galilee. Herod had violated the the Law of Moses by committing adultery with his half-brother's wife, Herodias. As a result of John's preaching Herod later arrested the prophet and placed him in jail, where he eventually lost his head to the whims of Herodias.

Can we hope to start our lives over? Yes! If we realize who we are: Sinners who need to be saved by the loving grace of God in and through his Son Jesus. We need to make ready the road of the Lord so he can come into our hearts. It will not be our old rebuilt life that is filled with a sin nature; rather it will be a brand new life in Christ.

Can we hope to start our lives over? Yes! If we will turn our lives over to Jesus. We must repent of our false views of Jesus, and ask God to show us who he really is-the Son of God, the Savior of the world, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the only hope man has for his sin, shame, and guilt. We must ask him to forgive us of our sins against him and others, and then invite him into our lives as Lord and Savior. As a result of that act of faith our Lord will come into our lives, forgive our sins, give us the gift of the person and power of the Holy Spirit, and give us eternal life beginning right now.

If our Lord Jesus Christ is willing to save a 70-year-old man in our midst who has now become a child of God, then that same grace is available to you right now. Do not put off this wonderful offer of eternal life, for, as the Scripture declares, "today is the day of salvation."

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