

The Preacher, John the Baptist

Scripture is clear that John the Baptist's ministry was focused on preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. John is the first prophet in 400 years and marks God's revival of prophecy to the Jewish people and beyond. He preached the key elements of the gospel of salvation. However, it is Jesus who would bring this gospel of salvation to full reality by both his teachings and actions. Before we examine these key elements of the gospel John preached, I want to establish the historical background to John's ministry.

Background to John's Ministry

We begin with the setting - the time and place in which these events took place. We can establish the time from scripture. Fast-forward to the near future when Jesus was in Jerusalem for Passover and cleansed the temple. The Jews who were gathered questioned Jesus by what authority did he drive the businessmen from the temple. Reading in John chapter 2, ¹⁹“Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’ ²⁰The Jews then said, ‘It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?’ ” (John 2:19-20) A little detective work dates the beginning of the rebuilding of the temple in 19 B.C. and this reveals that this Passover, 46 years later, was in 27 A.D. Therefore, Jesus' ministry began in 26 A.D. and John's ministry began in late 25 or early 26 A.D. Since Jesus was born before Herod died in 4 B.C. Jesus would have been 30 years old when he began his ministry in 26 A.D. and John was 6 months older than his cousin.

Luke gives a variety of details, as every good historian does, to show the accuracy of his account. Follow me in your Bible, beginning in verse 1 of chapter 3, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea (ee-too·rah·yah) and Trachonitis (trakh·o·nee·tis), and Lysanias (loo·san·ee·as) tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.” I find all these references to key political leaders fascinating and I spent way too much time reading the history of each one of these people in my study this week. However, this is not where I want to spend our time this morning. I will leave it up to you to research and read about lives of these leaders and how they were intertwined and how God controls everything so that his plan will come about.

I do want to take a quick glance at the last 2 people mentioned since they were the main plotters and schemers of the opposition to the Messiah and of the illegal trial and execution of Jesus. Luke implies that there are 2 high priests; Annas and Caiaphas and many have criticized this and try to use it to show Luke and the Bible are in error. Records show that Annas was high priest from 7 to 15 A.D. He was the opposite of the meaning of his name, which is “humble”. He was shrewd, a schemer, and he was motivated by money and power. A major source of his income came from temple business - the sale of animals for sacrifice and a percentage from the moneychangers that lasted beyond his official time as high priest and continued until his death. So well known was his greed that the outer courts of the temple where these business dealings were held became commonly known as the Bazaar of Annas. This is the very temple court that Jesus cleansed. Annas was like the “Godfather” of the Jewish religious mafia. Pilate’s predecessor Valerius removed Annas from office because of his concern for Annas’ power.

The high priest served at the pleasure of the Roman governor of Judea. Valerius then installed Eleazar (el-aw-zawr), Annas' son as a compromise but removed him after 2 years in 17 A.D. Eleazar was not very gifted politically, so his time was short. Valerius placed Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, as the high priest in 18 A.D. Caiaphas was equally as cunning as his father-in-law. Even though Caiaphas was high priest it was Annas who held the real power and Caiaphas did his bidding. Many still considered Annas as the true high priest and he used his power for control over all religious business. So, Luke was correct to say there were 2 high priests. Jesus would soon threaten Caiaphas and Annas' hold on power, as John 2 and Matthew 21 reveals and these high priests could not allowed this. Sounds like a "soap opera" and politics that we have today – greed, power, scheming and always maneuvering for control. Unfortunately this seeking of power and control in found in Christian religion today, not in the Christian faith and belief, but in religion.

Reading again from Luke chapter 3, verses 2 and 3, "the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan." The religious power base of Israel was in Jerusalem and John separated himself from this man-centered corrupt system fabricated to appear to submit to God. John makes this clear by his actions and words in verses 7 and 8 "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' " Those seeking God's truth needed to leave the establishment of the legalistic Jewish religious system. It is the same today; believers are not to accept the morally and spiritually bankrupt system of many denominations and churches that seek to have control by a few and appeal to many. Some, but not all, of our TV evangelists and famous religious people are heretics

and they are part of Satan's work to produce the broad church to take people's focus off of the saving relationship with God through the Christ Jesus and place their focus on many other things and idols. True believers seek God and his truth. They take the Holy Spirit into their hearts and souls and live for the glory of God and they are what scripture refers to as the remnant. The questions before each of us is, are we part of the remnant, the narrow road or are we part of the broad road, the broad church as Matthew wrote of in chapter 7 of his gospel account? John was calling people to separate from the corrupt Jewish religious system and to be part of the remnant. Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, called people to become part of the remnant of true believers. Are we, my beloved, part of the remnant living with the love, grace and mercy of God and holding firmly to his truth as revealed in his Word the Bible? The Bible is God's Word not mans and we have no right to change it to suit our likes and dislikes.

Just as Israel had become a system corrupted by power, but worked to look religious, there are portions of the Christian church that over the last 2000 years that failed to hold true to the Word of God. The most obvious example is the Catholic Church, which became corrupt and the Reformation was the struggle to break away and return to the Bible, just as John the Baptist preached for people to break away and come back to a relationship with God. The Reformation gave us the **Five Solas**. As much of the church today that calls itself Christian moves away from God's truth - we are called to the Word of God and can take up the Five Solas as our battle cry today as the Reformers did 500 years ago. Let me review these Five Solas, these Latin titles, and their meanings – for they are foundational to a Christian's life.

Sola Scriptura – The Scripture Alone is the Standard.

Soli Deo Gloria – For the Glory of God Alone

Solo Christo – By Christ’s Work Alone are We Saved

Sola Gratia – Salvation by Grace Alone

Sola Fide – Justification by Faith Alone The Core Values of Canyon Bible Church and the Five Solas with scripture references are printed and are on the counter in the back if you would like to take one with you for further study.

This brings us to the foundation of what John’s ministry was built upon. Reading from verse 3, John preached, “[proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins](#). . . we see John’s prime purpose continued in verse 16, he says, ‘I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.’¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’¹⁸ [So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.](#)” John’s ministry was characterized by 3 primary messages; first, there is one who God has sent to forgive peoples sins. Secondly, people need to repent from their sins. Third, people need to be baptized as an outward sign of their repentance. These are the 3 key areas we will focus on this morning and what they meant at the time of John and Jesus and what they mean today.

Forgiveness of Sins

The Jewish people were trapped in a system of religious works and John preached that there was One, the Messiah who could forgive their sins. Ritual did not save. One thing all false religions have in common is salvation through works. Peter defended the precept that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, whether one is Jew or Gentile, when he was before his fellow Jews at the Jerusalem council saying, “[Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by](#)

placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” (Acts 15:10-11) The Jewish people should have known that the new covenant, with the coming of the Messiah, promised forgiveness of sins. The prophet Jeremiah wrote 600 years earlier the words of God, ⁸“I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. ... ²⁰ In those days and in that time ... I will pardon those whom I leave as a remnant.” (Jeremiah 33:8 and 50:20) The prophet Ezekiel said God was going to “establish for you an everlasting covenant” through the Messiah (Ezekiel 16:60) King David believed God would send the Messiah, inspiring him to write, ¹“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. ² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. ... ⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” (Psalm 32:1-2, 5) God’s plan of salvation had always been to forgive sins permanently. Animal sacrifices were only meant to show people their need for repentance and their desperate need for the Messiah. As we learned in chapter 1, John’s father, filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied his son would proclaim God’s forgiveness. In verse 76, His son, John would “be called the prophet of the Most High; for ~~you~~ *John* will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.” (Luke 1:76-77) People were oppressed by ritual and because of their sin and guilt; they lacked hope. The same is true today. As Paul wrote and we believe, “For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.” (Romans 3:22-25) My beloved,

you cannot earn your salvation - it is the gift of God. However, you must have faith believing in Christ as your Savior and you need to surrender to God's gift of the Holy Spirit in order to live daily by faith. As we surrender to our Lord we are deeply convicted of our sin and this requires repentance.

Repentance

Forgiveness comes only to those who acknowledge and turn from their sins. So, John preached the need for people to repent. This was a concept the Jewish people most likely remembered, but ritual had replaced the heart of repentance with the act of the sacrifice. The prophet Isaiah wrote of the need to turn from one sins and repent. He wrote, ⁶“Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” (Isaiah 55:6-7) It has always been about the heart of one who seeks to have a relationship with God the Creator. The Scriptures have made this clear, as Ezekiel wrote the words of God, ³⁰“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.” (Ezekiel 18:30-32) Repentance is not just the acknowledgment of who God the Father or Jesus Christ the Son are, but it is the change of heart to turn away from the world and place ones life under the Lordship of Christ as his slave. One is deeply grieved by their sin and seeks God to overcome their weakness by His power through God the Holy Spirit that dwells within every believer. This was the true need of Adam and every generation to this very day. Paul wrote to the

Thessalonians the true path of a believer, “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,¹⁰ and to wait for his Son from heaven.” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10) This is the reason John the Baptist preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” in verse 3. There is the surrender of the heart, a spiritual baptism that takes place before one is baptized physically as the sign of repentance. True repentance cannot exist without faith in salvation through Christ. Repentance and faith are the paired works of the Holy Spirit that go hand-in-hand. Repentance is not a human work that produces salvation. Repentance is when sinners, by the regeneration of their souls by the Holy Spirit, recognize their dire condition and admit they cannot save themselves and turn to Jesus in faith as the only One who can save them. Those who are unregenerate will never understand this, for they are spiritually dead. Christ made this clear,¹⁹ “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.” (John 3:19-21) Dead people can do nothing; they just lie on the slab in the morgue. The world is spiritually dead and therefore does not recognize their sins against God and is under the influence of the evil prince of this world. While the world is indifferent to sin, as the Holy Spirit spiritually regenerates one, they are grieved by their sin and seek to live righteously before the Holy God. Believer’s lives are marked by holiness. Is your life marked by holiness? Do the people around you see your heart attitude of desiring to live holy? Holy means to be set apart, belonging to God – is this the mark of your life? As Christians these are outward signs of our desire to live holy for God. We tell the world and our fellow believers of our commitment to Christ in an outward sign of submission.

Baptism

Baptism is such a sign. However the baptism that John was performing was not the Christian baptism that symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because it had not yet been established. John's baptism did not produce forgiveness because no human act can produce that. John's baptism was not Jewish, even though Judaism had ceremonial washings; there was not baptism for the Jews. While there was no baptism for the Jews, there was the baptism of Gentiles who converted to Judaism. Therefore, John's baptism in the Jordan River showed that as people confessed their sins it was a public acknowledgement that they were no better than Gentiles and their sins separated them from God. They were conceding that their sins cut them off from the covenant blessings of God. For Jews to publicly admit that their sin placed them on the same level as the loathed Gentiles was shocking and showed the power of God upon John and his preaching.

Only some who came to hear John were repentant and most would reject Jesus when he came. John knew the hearts of many – Luke does not identify who these many are, but Matthew in chapter 3 of his gospel account does – it is the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to see what was bringing so many to the wilderness – John knew these religious leaders would be enemies of the Messiah. John responded with a warning beginning in verse 7, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Only a few heeded John's warning. They asked what they needed to do to receive the

blessings of God. John gives practical advice since his baptism convicted but would not result in their salvation. His baptism was to begin changing their heart for receiving the Messiah. Therefore, John tells them to be generous and serve others. His advice is for the common people, tax collectors and Jewish soldiers. This caused many to question if John was the long awaited Messiah and John answered in verse 16, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Let me ask, was your baptism one that recognized your separation from God, as the Jews? Or, was your baptism a public declaration of your death to the world and your life lived for the glory of God though your faith in Jesus?

So I preach, as John preached and as the apostles preached and as Paul wrote to the Romans, ²⁰ “For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹ But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. ²³ For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 2:20-23) Amen! Let each of us go from here into the world and preach to all who will listen, “I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, ²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:19-21) Amen and Amen!