

**Give thanks to the Lord for he is good and his love endures forever. Amen.**

**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 Traconitis, 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 desert.<sup>3</sup> He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>4</sup> As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: “A voice of one calling in the desert, ‘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 mankind will see God’s salvation.” **This is God’s Word.**

**Dear Friends,**

I want you to listen as I describe the political, religious and social climate at the time of John the Baptist and see if there are any similarities to what we have today.

The world was spiritually bankrupt; there were many false gods and the majority of the known world wasn’t concerned with religion. In Judea there were two major parties: the Pharisees and the Sadducees.

The Pharisees looked down on people and despised them. They liked the old traditions and rejected anything new. They were proud and self-righteous and didn’t associate with anyone outside of the Jewish culture unless absolutely necessary. They lusted after power, especially power over the people. They didn’t see a need for a Savior.

The Sadducees was a smaller group but more powerful because they controlled the money. They lived for the day and denied spiritual things. They didn’t believe in life after death nor angels. Talk of the resurrection was foolishness to them. Jewish tradition was okay but not as important to them as to the Pharisees. They would deal with the Gentiles if it meant a profit could be made. They would have been involved with the money changer and vendors that occupied the outer courts of the temple.

There were a number of smaller groups with their own agendas but none had the influence of the Pharisees and Sadducees. However we shouldn’t discount the common people. Many still worshiped according to God’s Law, celebrated the Passover and brought their sacrifices to the temple. In spite of the efforts of the Pharisees and Sadducees there were still believers in Judah.

And this was the time that God had chosen to send his Son into the world – the harvest was plentiful; that is there was an abundance of folks who needed to hear the word but the world was

not ready to hear the Gospel. There are a lot of similarities to our own times – not exact comparisons but as we look at the world we live in it is spiritually bankrupt and the leadership of the world has their own agenda and it usually doesn't conform to God's will or God's Word – they are living for the day and for themselves but just as it was at the time of John, the harvest is plentiful but the world does not seem to be prepared for the Gospel.

Some people would say the Bible isn't relevant to modern times but as you think of these comparisons I have given you it becomes clear that things haven't changed a lot and even though we wished it didn't, history does repeat itself. So what do we do? **“Listen to the Voice in the Wilderness,” “It is a voice proclaiming Law and Gospel,” and “It is a Voice to Prepare Us for our Savior's Coming.”**

I. Why does Luke give us this list of names at the beginning of chapter three? It helps us to place this time in history and to see that this account he records for us really happened.

Knowing that this was during the reign of Tiberius Caesar tells us that the Roman empire has peaked and was now moving towards its decline. The final downfall would take a couple of hundred more years but change was happening and it wasn't good. The Roman army was manned by more mercenaries than actual Romans and so the heart and motivation of the army was changing. Sexual sins were rampant as well as divorce and that had an impact on marriage and family. Materialism was what ruled the day and the excesses of the Roman Empire would be its downfall.

The tetrarchs named weren't any better than the Romans. They ruled the Jewish people but they were not men of faith. Even the position of high priest had been politicized and the men filling the office did not fulfill their duties as God had prescribed in his Word. Luke records the names of the rulers and the high priests to give us an indication that the “scepter had indeed departed from Judah.”

But God intervened as the world headed down this path of destruction. He had made a promise and it was time to fulfill that promise and so God sent John. We don't know how God came to John whether he spoke to him directly or in a dream or in a vision but God called John to go out with a message of repentance and he gave John the command to baptize for the forgiveness of sins.

We don't know if God told John where to conduct his ministry but John stayed away from the big cities and centers of government and religion. John worked in the country around the

Jordan River – a wilderness region – preaching and baptizing. People don't always like to hear a call to repent of their sins but John's message drew crowds and after his message was proclaimed he baptized to bring forgiveness to those confessing their sins. The power of the Holy Spirit was evident in John's ministry.

AS we think about John's message and ask ourselves "What do I want to hear?" it usually isn't a call to repent. Recently a sermon was given on 1 Corinthians 13 at the Wesleyan University in Oklahoma. The sermon was about showing Christian love and a student complained that they were offended by the sermon because it made them feel uncomfortable because they hadn't shown enough love in their life. They didn't want to hear anything that might make them feel bad and yet God's Word had the proper effect – it pricked their conscience – they needed to hear it to understand how imperfect they are even though that is not what any of us want to hear.

We don't want to hear about sin, especially the sins we have committed. But as God gave this message to John he knew that we need to see our sins to prepare us and our hearts to receive forgiveness. Without the Law we muffle our conscience. Without the Law we take God's grace as a license to sin and we begin to tolerate sin in every form. Without the Law, we don't see the need for Jesus and we can become pretty self-righteous all by ourselves.

But John's message wasn't all Law – it has the sweet balm of the Gospel to sooth the heart troubled by the Law. This soothing balm came in the form of baptism – John preached the law and baptized the repentant folks to bring them forgiveness of their sins. John's baptism was just as effective as our baptism today because through that baptism the Holy Spirit created faith and brought forgiveness to all who were baptized.

This miracle of faith then enabled them to make changes to their lives as a fruit of that faith. God's grace was evident in the Word, baptism, and the working of the Holy Spirit just as it is today. The voice of John preaching in the wilderness is a voice we want to listen to also. The world of today hasn't changed much from the world at the time of John. We have a lot more conveniences but the attitudes are the same and we all need to hear God's message declared in his word.

So repent of your sins. Rejoice in your baptism that has given you the gift of faith and brings you forgiveness for your sins. And not only your baptism but the Gospel that you continue to hear on a regular basis. God loves you and sent his Son for you to redeem your sins and bring

you forgiveness. It's God's love then that moves us to consider what changes you need to make to try and turn away from the temptations that so easily entangle you.

The kingdom of heaven is at hand – Christ has come and he has made you a member of his kingdom and he will come again. Make sure you are prepared by listening to God's messengers and taking the message to heart. Let God's Word knock down the mountains of trouble and fill in the valleys of despair that are part of life. Let him smooth out the roads of sin and give us a straight path of righteousness to travel on as we live for him. Not because we are perfect but because we are perfectly forgiven by trusting that Jesus has paid for our sins – by trusting in the promises of God that he always fulfills. Rejoice in the Lord as we continue to make plans to celebrate God's gift of salvation. Amen