

# The King's Courier

Luke 3:1-20

Sometimes, it seems like it can take forever to find just the right illustration or just the right tidbit of humor to work into a message. But, if all one needs is one tacky little snippet to poke fun at a preacher or his craft, hundreds can be found in just a matter of seconds on the internet.

- One cartoon depicts a preacher standing before his congregation. In the front row sits Jesus – sound asleep.
- One joke says the reason many churches now serve coffee after the worship service is that the caffeine insures that people are fully awake before driving home.

Things were different when John the Baptist was preaching. People actually ventured into the desert to hear this man. He didn't introduce his messages with "Good morning," or, "Turn in your Bibles to ..." He might say, "You brood of vipers!" I don't get a sense that John knew many jokes or warm, fuzzy stories. He was blunt, but those hungering for God responded.

When a king visited occupied territories, his arrival was announced by a courier. Ordinarily, such envoys came arrayed in royal garb, but Jesus was a different kind of King, so John came as a different kind of envoy. He emerged from the desert, clad in camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist. He had been nourished on a wilderness diet of locusts and wild honey. All this served to communicate that finery, softness and luxury are not the marks of royalty in God's kingdom. Also, John's garb and diet identified him with the prophets of old.

The wilderness reminds us of the wanderings of the ancient Israelites before they entered the Promised Land. It was also a powerful symbol of the spiritual barrenness under which the Jews of John's day were living. His task was to announce that these days of bleakness were about to end. *Messiah* was coming. In a way, we are couriers like John. It is our privilege as well to announce the end of life's drifting and barrenness wherever Jesus reigns as King. So, let's consider together this archetype of a courier, his candor and courage, to see what we might learn.

## I. The Prophetic Role John Received (1, 2)

<sup>1</sup>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.

### A. The Spiritual World of the Jews Was a Barren Desert

Luke was written to be an orderly account of the life of Jesus, the *Messiah* of the Jewish nation. Luke fixes the historicity of John by citing six religious and governmental administrations with which he was contemporary. What we know of these characters reveals a sorry state for the world, and especially, for the land of the Jews. Luke describes a rogue's gallery.

Tiberius, the second emperor of Rome, was a drunk and a despot. Herod the Great, the paranoid old nut who murdered the baby boys in Bethlehem in his quest to destroy a prophesied King, was dead but he had divided his kingdom among his boys. "Tetrarchs" means "rulers of a fourth". The Herod in Galilee was Antipas, who would eventually have John beheaded. Philip ruled an area northeast of Galilee. Lysanias ruled to the northwest. Judea and Samaria to the south were ruled by Archelaus, but he was so rotten and vile that the Jews petitioned Rome to remove him. "Take him, please take him!" Rome placed their own governor, Pontius Pilate, in Jerusalem when Jesus and John were about age ten. Pilate was no bargain in the exchange. He was sanctioned numerous times by Rome for over-the-top cruelty to the provincials.

The religious scene was equally dismal. A high priest was to serve until death, but Rome deemed the office too powerful and injected itself by appointing the high priest. Annas, the only high priest according to Mosaic Law, remained the corrupt old political boss in Jerusalem even through six Roman-appointed successors – five sons and Caiphas, his son-in-law, the high priest when Jesus was crucified. The chief priests were theologically liberal, rejecting almost anything supernatural. They were also quite corrupt. They had shady deals with the Romans and, for a price, allowed the temple grounds to be cluttered with merchants and money changers during the festival weeks, when pilgrims needed to buy sacrifices and change their foreign currencies. As you will recall, there were at least two occasions when Jesus was infuriated by these abuses.

Besides the priests, the other major religious influence in the land was the Pharisees, but they were as rigid, legalistic, severe and self-righteous as the chief priests were liberal and crooked. The uneducated masses were easily exploited by both of these camps of religious extremists.

By the time of John and Jesus, there was much religious ritual in the land, but little meaning behind any of it. Through all of this, the “the quiet of the land”, authentically pious people of faith, waited patiently for *Messiah*; people like a village carpenter named Joseph, Mary, his betrothed, her older cousin Elizabeth and her husband, a godly old priest named Zechariah.

## **B. In this Barren Setting, Four Centuries of Prophetic Silence Were Broken**

“... the word of God came to John son of Zechariah...” With these words, Luke numbered John with prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Under the inspiration of God, these men counseled, and at times denounced emperors, kings and priests, as well as nations at large. The Lord had not spoken to the Jews through a prophet in four-hundred years, but Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, spoke of one more prophet to come, another prophet like Elijah.

The angel Gabriel affirmed that this expectation would be fulfilled in John when he announced John’s birth to his father, the priest, Zechariah. Matthew and Mark call John “the Baptist”. Luke simply calls him “the son of Zechariah”, for he had already introduced his readers to Zechariah when he told the story leading up to the births of John and Jesus. In the wilderness of Judea, John, son of Zechariah, a man of priestly lineage, now proclaims the hour of God’s Kingdom.

## **II. The Purpose John Embraced (3-6)**

### **A. John Came Preaching a New Kind of Baptism verse 3**

...<sup>3</sup>He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Gentiles converting to Judaism were baptized as a rite of cleansing, but John proclaimed a baptism for repentance to the Jews. Apparently, their religious practices were so grossly out of touch with God’s intent that a new ritual expressing repentance and starting over was needed. Some folks had law-keeping down pat as they understood law-keeping, but the nation was spiritually bankrupt in God’s eyes. No amount of law-keeping could secure God’s forgiveness.

### **B. John’s Life’s Work Was to Prepare the Way for *Messiah* verses 4-6**

...<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.”

Luke quotes Isaiah as he describes one responsibility of a royal courier. He did not just announce the coming of the king. He also compelled the subject peoples to ready their land for the king's arrival. Roads were repaired. New roads were built. Low places were filled. High spots were leveled. Crooked paths were widened into highways. Preparing for a king was a big deal, and the greatest such undertaking ever for the greatest King of all time was why John was born.

People clamor for religious experience because they are not interested in the cost of true renewal. Renewal, or revival, only comes after repentance. To welcome God's kingdom is to face our carnal values. It is to identify the places that are not God where we place our trust. We must see how we have reshaped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into the domestic pushover idol that we can live with. We must see the impurity of our amusements. We must see our indifference to others. That was John's idea of kingdom prep work, and it is still the prep work that secures the kingdom.

### **III. The Purity John Demanded (7-14)**

#### **A. Many in John's Day Lived under a False Sense of Entitlement verses 7-9**

<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."

A bizarre little guy named Joe Smiddy was an undersized fifth-grader when I was in the fourth grade. I only remember him because he was always picking fights with fourth-graders twice his size. His sole rationale was that he could beat up fourth-graders BECAUSE he was a fifth-grader as if that was some law of birth order. Joe took a few thumpings. The fact that I gave him one shouldn't bother you. I'm pretty sure my twin sister, the missionary, worked him over as well. What matters is that Joe eventually and wisely rethought the shaky foundation of his confidence.

The Jews were not so wise. The security they attached to their blood descent from Abraham was shaky at best. Some pictured Abraham guarding Hell's gates to keep any circumcised Jew from accidentally wandering in. They believed God loved one Israelite more than He loved all the nations of the world collectively. John told them to quit kidding themselves. God could fashion children of Abraham out of rocks. They needed to repent and then live as if they had really repented.

#### **B. John's Idea of Repentance Was Highly Practical verses 10-14**

<sup>10</sup>"What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

<sup>11</sup>John answered, "The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same."

<sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also 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."

Now THAT's relevant preaching! John tells us exactly what God requires of us.

When asked what God wanted of them, John answered, “Sharing is a nice place to start.” To own a spare tunic or to stockpile food when others have nothing may be considered sub-human in God’s eyes. Did you know that even vampire bats will share regurgitated blood with their fellow bats who return from their blood-sucking expeditions empty-handed? Who wants to stand before the Judge at the end of the age and come up on the short end of a comparison to a vampire bat?

Integrity is a nice follow-up to sharing. There were publicans in the crowd, men who entered into contracts with Rome to collect a specific amount of tax revenue from a given area. They pocketed whatever they could squeeze out of people beyond that set amount. “You have to stop that,” Jesus told them. The soldiers there were likely the Jewish forces that policed the smaller villages. They were in positions to extort gifts by intimidation. “You have to knock that off too,” Jesus added. John didn’t command any of them to quit their jobs. He just told them to be honest.

Often, a believer may wonder if he is where God wants him to be. God can make special calls to special fields clear, but in the meantime, He wants us all to represent Him well whatever we do.

#### **IV. The Perspective John Maintained (15–18)**

<sup>15</sup>The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. <sup>16</sup>John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with 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 preached the good news to them.

##### **A. The Christ Would Bring a Greater Baptism**

Some thought John might be “the Christ”, so he pointed out the differences. First of all, *Messiah* would be so great that John felt unworthy to perform for Him even the lowliest service of a slave, to pull off his shoes. John’s water baptism of repentance helped the people acknowledge their spiritual barrenness, but only the King Himself could repair them. *Messiah*’s baptism would place the Holy Spirit, the very life of God, in them. *Messiah* would also baptize with fire. Fire suggests our purification, the removal of all that is worthless and lifeless. Fire also foreshadows trials and even persecutions through which *Messiah* molds His people in true righteousness.

##### **B. John Preached Repentance in Preparation for Messiah’s Judgment**

Jesus came to reveal the grace of His Father to men. It is a sweet, precious gospel but it is also a gospel that needs to be heeded, for when that opportunity for grace passes, the sweetness passes. All that remains is judgment. The author of Hebrews pens the most relevant question conceivable: “... how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (Hebrews 2:3). “Don’t blow this moment,” John echoes, “for only judgment follows.” With a winnowing fork, harvested wheat was tossed into the air. The grain fell to the ground. The chaff blew to the side and was burned. That is how judgment will come to the world and even to the visible church. Those without God’s Spirit will be separated from His children as *Messiah* judges men’s hearts.

#### **V. The Price John Paid (19, 20)**

<sup>19</sup>But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, <sup>20</sup>Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.

## **A. John Dared to Face Down the Tyrants of His Age**

Herod Antipas seduced the wife of his half-brother, another Philip, not the tetrarch, and took her as his wife. Not only was Herodias his sister-in-law, she was also his niece, the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus. The Jews bitterly resented this leader who so blatantly indulged his whims in spite of their laws, but few had the courage to speak up. It is risky to rebuke a tyrant, but John took that risk and rebuked Herod Antipas. After John sat in jail for a time, Herod had him beheaded. Speaking God's truth in the face of evil is never easy. But failing to speak can wound us even worse. We may feel guilty for a while, but eventually, we can become indifferent.

## **B. Ultimately, It Was Jesus Who Secured a Legacy for John**

In spite of John's usual certainty, there was a time, while in prison, that he questioned if his life had been spent in vain. Crazy kings who cut people's heads off can get folks to second-guessing themselves. He sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Luke 7:20). Jesus encouraged John, sending this message: "The blind see. Cripples walk. Lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead live again. Good news is preached to the poor -all this, just as the prophets said, so hang in there." Then, Jesus turned to the crowd he was with and uttered the loftiest praise He ever bestowed on any man:

<sup>24</sup>... "What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? <sup>25</sup>If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and indulge in luxury are in palaces. <sup>26</sup>But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>27</sup>This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

<sup>28</sup>I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." - Luke 7:24-28

When all has been settled, John's greatness is remembered because he was right about Jesus. Had he been wrong we would never have heard of him. But, a legacy is not the mark of kingdom greatness. Right now, we don't even know the names of most of history's greatest saints. Your potential greatness exceeds John, but who ever heard of you? How is this possible?

Our greatness exceeds John's in that we are citizens of a kingdom he could only announce. The Holy Spirit lives in us. God's Word is made complete in us through Jesus. But, if we are not guaranteed a memorable legacy, then how will our greatness ever be realized? What really made John great? His legacy is just a by-product of what Jesus cared most about, his loyalty. One day, our greatness will be measured by the King Himself in terms not of legacy, but of loyalty.

We all have much to learn from John. Is there anything that you want to build or accomplish or be remembered for that is only secondarily about pointing others to Jesus? Are you concerned more with legacy or loyalty? John demonstrates loyalty to God in the face of a hostile culture. The Bible holds out many promises that we too will one day hear similar words of praise from Jesus if we will serve Him with similar loyalty; words like, "Well done, good and faithful servant."