

ALL MANKIND WILL SEE GOD'S SALVATION

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

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— 2 during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3 He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 4 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. 5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6 And all people will see God’s salvation.’”

Who was President when you were born? If our years were not numbered the way they are today, that’s probably how you would talk about the year of your birth, and other events of the past. And that’s how Luke introduces the chronological parts of his gospel, especially the events leading up to the birth of Jesus, the preaching of John the Baptist which came just months before the beginning Jesus’ ministry, and to a lesser extent, the date of the crucifixion.

So, although it’s an interesting study, we’re going to turn aside from all of the chronological and geographical details and focus on three things in the time available to us: (1) the doctrine and comfort of baptism, (2) the prophecy of Isaiah, and (3) the preparation John preaches to us about the coming of Jesus.

BAPTISM

First: Baptism. There is some confusion among some Christians today about baptism, and the best way to understand the differences and the solution to those differences is to ask: What does baptism do for us? When we’ve done that—and one of the most important passages about it is the text before us—then we’ll understand how to answer questions about how to baptize, when to baptize, who can baptize, who should be baptized, and so on.

John came preaching and baptizing, and both of these were by the command of God. How God’s word came to John is not revealed to us. In the Old Testament, this usually happened in one of three or four ways: Another prophet might come and preach (which probably isn’t the case with John), or he might have a dream like Joseph, or he might see a vision like Ezekiel, or the Angel of the Lord might have come and spoken to him directly. Which of these happened with John, we don’t know, but the Lord commanded him to baptize, and to preach the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Baptism is the application of water together with the word of God, specifically the name of God, to save us from our sins. So what three things does baptism do for us? Well, Luther put together the most important passages about the results of baptism from Mark 16 and Titus 3 and Romans 6, and he boiled baptism down into these three things. In addition to faith, which the gospel in

baptism actually creates in us, baptism gives (1) first of all, the forgiveness of our sins. Also (2) it delivers us from death and the devil, and (3) it gives eternal salvation to all who believe this.

1. Forgiveness of sins
2. Delvers from death and from the devil
3. Gives eternal salvation to all who believe

Now you see why knowing what baptism does answers all our questions about who should get it, whether it matters how they get it, and how soon a sinful human being should be baptized. The examples of baptism in the New Testament focus mainly on adults because Christianity and baptism were new, just as the examples of circumcision in the Old Testament focus mainly on adults because circumcision was new when it was given to Abraham as the entry point for people to enter into the family of believers.

ISAIAH'S PROPHECY

As we listen to John's message and respond to the grace of God in our baptism with preparations in our hearts and lives for the arrival of the Lord Jesus himself, there is one question to be asked and answered before we can apply what John and Isaiah say to our lives. We need to bring this out into the open or else we can't apply this passage to ourselves correctly. The question is this: Might Isaiah's prophecy point to someone else besides John? Well, we must see in this passage, that it isn't John who claims this, but the Holy Spirit. Also, Jesus himself points to John as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, and so we have the Word of God coming to John, the Spirit of the Lord acknowledging John, and the Son of God attesting to John as the one and only fulfillment, the forerunner of the Messiah. Therefore Jesus Christ—the one John pointed to and proclaimed—is the Savior established by God in his holy word.

Why make a point about this? Because so many in the world act as if the Savior has not yet come. But we know that he has. John came before and prepared the way for him, and so we do not wait for his first coming, but only for his second coming.

PREPARE

This second coming is part of what John is talking about as he preaches that we should prepare the way of the Lord.

1. He urges us to prepare through Baptism. As we know, baptism washes away sins, not by virtue of water or the one who baptizes, but because of the promise of Christ in the gospel.
2. He also urges us to prepare through repentance. Repentance turns away from sin because we are crushed by God's judgment, and lifted back up again by God's mercy.
3. John prepared people in his time with a visual illustration from Israel's history, but preaching and baptizing on the banks of the Jordan River, near the place where the Prophet Elijah had first appeared—Elijah was prophet to the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, and the Gentiles, too. John's hint would find full voice later when John would say: "The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29).

4. John prepared people by proclaiming the Word of God. Faith doesn't come from inside of us, or from human arguments, or from doing good deeds. Faith comes from hearing the gospel message.
5. John also prepared people by being the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. He allowed himself to be the Christian God called him to be. He didn't balk or argue with God about what he would rather do.
6. He also used the words of Isaiah, the command: "Prepare the way of the Lord." This is at the time a command and an invitation. It is God's will to be obeyed, but God has compassion on us sinners and helps us to do what he commands.
7. Finally, John applied the message of Isaiah to every part of our spiritual and physical lives: **Make his path straight** means getting the crookedness of sin out of our lives.
 - **Every valley will be filled**—the valleys that are the depths of our depravity, filled up by the obedience of Jesus himself.
 - **Every mountain and hill made low** – the peaks of our arrogance and folly, when we think we know better than God knows. All of this needs to be leveled and brought in line with the will of God and not the will of man; the will of you and me.
 - **The crooked will become straight**—this is God already at work in us. We're not the ones to straighten us out, Jesus us! This is what we praise God for and thank him for, because he has taken my sinful crookedness and brought me in line with what the Father demands.
 - **The rough ways smooth.** This, too, is the work of God. Do you have rough ways to smooth out before the Lord returns? Since we don't know when that will be, when would it be a good time to work on your rough edges? Today, right now, is the day and time.

Finally, Luke says, "**All mankind will see God's Salvation.**" This sentence is both Law and Gospel. It's law to those who reject Jesus. They will see it. No one will miss it on the Last Day. But for those who turn from Jesus, the coming of his salvation won't do them any good. But for us, for everyone who puts their faith in Jesus, it will be a glorious return.

In our baptism, our sins were washed away. In God's holy word, we see that the coming of John the Baptist fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy about the forerunner of Jesus. And through John's ministry and preaching, we prepare our hearts and lives for the return of our Savior Jesus. In this season we remember his first coming, but in our lives we anticipate his second coming. We thank him for our forgiveness, we ask him to help us show our thankfulness with our lives, and we know that he wants us to share our faith, so that all mankind will see God's salvation.

And the peace of God, etc. Amen.