

# JOHN THE BAPTIST COMES TO TOWN

## I. Preparatory Work

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With your Bibles opened to Luke 3:1-18, let's read the account of the ministry of John the Baptist: "Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea, and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the Word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins; As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, That God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

*"And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then? He answereth and saith unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise. Then came also publicans to be baptized, and said unto him, Master, what shall we do? And he said unto them, Exact no more than that which is appointed you. And the soldiers likewise demanded of him, saying, And what shall we do? And he said unto them, Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages. And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not; John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire: Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge His floor, and will gather the wheat into His garner; but the chaff He will burn with fire unquenchable. And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people."*

Suffice it to say to begin with that John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness a very unusual message, "*Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand.*" Luke 3:3: "*And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*"

Now the baptism of John was not Christian baptism in the sense that it is practiced today, but it was a national symbol of repentance. When a person had repented of his sins, hated them, when his mind had been changed about them, when he had come under a sorrow for them and turned

from them, then he presented himself as a candidate for baptism. As it is written in the book of Isaiah, some 700 years before John the Baptist was ever born, there it was prophesied that one would come as a forerunner. Isaiah 40:3-5: "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

Now he says that the Lord is coming, the One that had been promised, the Lamb of God that was promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden; the One Who was going to die for sins, and put away sins by the sacrifice of Himself – that One is coming. Before He comes, there is a work that has to go on. There has to be a foundation laid, a preparation made. That preparation has the form of leveling. Every valley, every depression, every deep place is going to have to be filled up, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low.

John says if you are going to prepare the way of the Lord, you are going to make His paths straight. There is going to be a straightening of crooked paths. That is the preparation that John had to do. There had to be some crookedness straightened out, and the rough ways are going to have to be made smooth. Now the job that John the Baptist is trying to do here is not something you do with a toy shovel, but it's a bulldozer operation. There is going to have to be a terrific work going on in preparation of the coming One Who was to die for the sins of mankind. Then in the sixth verse John says that "All flesh shall see the salvation of God," but not until the preparatory work has gone on. Now the ministry of John the Baptist was the ministry of this leveling, of this making the crooked ways straight and the rough places smooth. His ministry was to prepare the people for the atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and their Saviour from their sins in this life and the life to come. Now my friends, in this way we see the pattern of God's work with men. In this way we see how God prepares the people to receive His Son. God sent His forerunner; He sent His witness before the Lord. And even so today, He sends the Holy Spirit, the Forerunner to witness before Him, and it is prophesied of the Forerunner that "He shall glorify Me, for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you. He shall not speak of Himself, and when He is come, He will convict the world of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment to come. "In the ministry of John the Baptist, therefore, we see a "way" being prepared for the Lord, and the Lord Jesus was not revealed until this work was done. Even so in this day, until the Holy Spirit has done the work in a bulldozer operation – until He has brought low, and filled up and straightened out crooked paths, until those changes are effectually wrought in one's life, and not until then, will a sinner see the salvation of God!

And John the Baptist said to the multitude who came forth to be baptized of him, "O generation of vipers .... "You say, "Preacher, I don't think people ought to use such language in the pulpit. It ought to be soft and easy; we ought not to offend people." Old John had not learned how to softsoap his congregation. All he knew to do was to call a spade a spade and a club a club. That's just exactly what he did. He had not received all the education that some of us have received, and he just thought that the best way to do it was to tell the people the facts as they were; so he said, "O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to .flee from the wrath to come?" Why are you coming? Then he said to them, "Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance." You do something to show that you are ready. You show evidence in your life that your ways are changed. This, my

friends, is the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. If you have truly repented, it will reflect itself in your conduct!

Then he said, "Don't begin to say unto yourself, 'We have Abraham to our father;' Don't say, 'We're all right; we don't have to go through that. Why, we are Methodists!' He said, "Don't begin to tack such a label onto yourself. We're all right; we're Americans. You know all Americans belong to a Christian nation – we're all right!" But John said, "God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham." That won't satisfy. But somebody says, "Well, we're Baptists; we believe Baptist doctrine." "All right," he said, "bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. Bring forth some evidence that the crooked ways have been made straight, that the mountains have been brought low, that the valleys have been filled up, and that the rough places have been smoothed out. Bring forth evidence that the operation of God has gone on in your life, whereby you have come to present yourself as a poor, repentant sinner to receive whatever God has for you."

John says again, "Begin not to say to yourselves, We have Abraham to our Father; for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid to the root of the trees. "It's already there; God's judgments are about to fall. "Every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. "Every soul that does not show evidence of true repentance and a changed attitude toward sin, a changed attitude toward Christ, a changed attitude toward his old nature, and a changed attitude toward God – everyone that brings not forth evidence of it shall be hewn down and cast into the fire regardless of the title that he bears, regardless of the position that he holds, regardless of how much he can trace his blood back to Abraham, unless he has brought forth fruit worthy of repentance he shall be hewn down and cast into the fire. Now that was preaching in the confidence of the Spirit of God, and the people cried out, "What shall we do then?" Bless the Lord, in the New Testament times when they preached, it got so rough, it got so hard that the people were held to the issue, so that they cried out in their sins, "What shall we do? What shall we do?"

In Acts 2:37 it is said that some were cut and stabbed to the heart until they cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" In Acts 16:30 the Philippian jailor cried out, "What must I do? What must I do?" My friends, this kind of religion that we have today where you have to get hold of a man's arm and pull at it, and stand behind him and push him, and finally drag him down and talk him into it, and douse him down under, and that's all there is to it, just ain't salvation. They didn't know anything like that in John's day. John stripped men of their veneer. He laid them out before the Lord God of heaven, and when they found themselves faced with the Holy God in the midst of their sin and despair, in spite of the fact that they claimed to be children of Israel, still they cried out, "What must we do?"

John begins to tell them. He said, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none, and he that hath meal let him do likewise. "Now, John, you just can't ask us to do that. We'll have to give up some things that belong to us, that are our rightful possessions. That demand is too great. He struck at their selfishness; he struck at their covetousness; he struck at their idolatry. John said, "That's got to go – it's got to go! Give evidence that you really mean business about this thing." Then there came the publicans – I can see them coming up to him and saying, "What

do you want us to do?" And he said unto them, "Exact no more than that which is appointed you." See them look at one another. "Why, that will put us out of business. That'll just kill us off." Why? Because the reason the publican was in business was in order to illegally extort money from the people. The Roman governor would assign these scalawag fellows a certain amount of taxes to be collected from their district, and anything they could get over that they pocketed for their own. So they said, "Now we want to get right with God; what must we do?" And he said, "You must stop taking anything more than that which is appointed to you to take." "But that's why we are publicans! Why, you mean we'll have to quit?" He said, "Yes, sir, you'll have to quit." And they said, "That's too hard." He said, "Already the axe is laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire."

Then came the soldiers, and they said, "What will we do? We'd like to get in on this; we'd like a little salvation. We'd like to be right with God. We'd like to have our sins forgiven. What do you want us to do?" He said to them, "Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages." "But that's why we are in the soldier business. Do you not know you will put us completely out of business; if we have to quit this and have to quit that and have to quit the other thing, it will ruin us!" John said, "You'll have to be ruined then; God is not going to accept you; He's not going to have anything to do with you." There's no Lamb of God, there's no Sacrifice of Calvary for that man who will keep on in his sins. But they say, "We can't do that." All right, the axe is already laid to the root of the tree, and every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is cut down and cast into the fire. And I hear one of the soldiers say, "Fellows, we can't do like we've been doing from now on. We cannot play the games we've been playing at the guard house. We are going to have to stop talking the way we've been talking."

My friends, the mountains are being brought low, are being cut down. Some valleys are being filled up, some crooked ways are being made straight, some rough places are being smoothed out, and that is the necessary operation before the revealing of the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. How different it is in our day! Some people walk down the aisle of what we call our churches, and they say, "What'll we do?" And we say, "Well, do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" And they say, "Yes." "Well, give me your hand that you will accept Him." And they say, "All right." And the preacher says, "All right, that's all you do; come right on in, we'll take you," and we tell them they are all right. My friends, old John the Baptist, if he'd come back to this country and see what's going on, he'd roll over in his grave!

I hear a soldier saying, "We don't believe God requires that of any man." John says, "All right." They say, "We are Abraham's children, and we believe that's enough." He says, "That's all right; go on; the axe is laid to the root of the tree." He said, "Some mountains have got to be cut down, some hills have got to be brought low, some deep places and depressions are going to have to be brought up to surface, all those crooked ways have got to be straightened, all those rough places have got to be made smooth." You say, "Well, now, preacher, that's the way John preached, but that's not the Gospel for our day." But I ask you, When did it change? Do you mean my Lord would shut out the rich young ruler for one tiny defect and let the poor fellow go on to hell, and then He lowered His terms a little later on? No, sir! Somebody else lowered it, but my Lord didn't.

The Scriptures say all the people were in suspense; they thought he was Jesus. I can hear them talking, "Maybe he is the One; we never heard anything like this before in our lives. What strange new doctrine is this? This is awful! He must be the Christ." So John answered saying unto them, "I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I cometh, the latchet of Whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose; He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." My friends, this is just preparation, but when He comes, He'll really do a work in you.

You'll never get over it. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He's really going to do something. The bulldozer operation will take place, and the Lord's going to come, and on that level spot He's going to rear a structure that will be incorruptible. Storms may rage, floods may come, and winds may blow and tornadoes may strike, and all the world come tumbling down around it, but on that level spot, when He comes to do His work, He's going to build something that's going to last forever and ever. He's going to plant there a new life. He's going to build there a new house. He's going to establish there a new dwelling place, and He Himself shall come and live within.

And so John the Baptist came to town and he gathered a great group of people around him who brought forth fruits worthy of repentance. They had been baptized in the Jordan confessing their sins, and then one day the Lord came along and John said, "Behold the Lamb of God – here He is, the One you've been waiting for! There's the One to take away your sin." Now the blessed Saviour is revealed. What took place? They left John to follow the Lord. Yes, sir! They were ready. Therefore you find John saying, "He must increase, and I must decrease." What did he mean by that? He meant that the following after Jesus increased as they left John. His preparation had been done; they had come repenting, confessing their sins, acknowledging their condition and bringing forth fruits worthy of repentance. And so, when John said, "There goes the Lord Jesus," they said, "This is what we've been waiting for," and salvation came to their house!

This is the work of God that must take place, and if you'll turn to Matthew, chapter 13, you'll discover the reason. There in that chapter the record tells us, the sower who went forth to sow the seed found four different kinds of soil. He found soil by the roadside; it was hard, it had never been broken up, never been plowed under. There was no growth when the seed hit on that soil. The birds of the air came and picked it up; it never had a chance. Some of the seed fell on rocky soil. The rocks had not been cleared out – they were still there, so when the seed fell there they struggled for growth for a little while, but when the sun came up, it withered because it had no root. Down underneath the external surface there were rocks that had never been removed. In the third type of soil, the soil that was infested with thorns and thistles that had not been plowed under or rooted out, the seed still did not have a chance; it was choked out.

But the soil in which seed was sowed and produced fruit unto everlasting life was soil that felt the sharp edge of the plow, that had been cleansed of the rocks, that had the thorns and the thistles and the briers taken out of it, and it was prepared to receive seed. Now, my friends, that's what the Scripture means when it says you've got to repent or you'll perish. The soil that received the seed and brought forth fruit unto everlasting life was soil that had experienced a preparation. My Lord never takes up habitation in any kind of heart or soul until that heart has been plowed up and broken up. He does not find any growth or root in any life that has not the stones cleared

out. Jeremiah the old prophet said, "Break up your fallow ground." Hosea 10:12-13 says: "Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy; break up your fallow ground: for it is time to seek the Lord, till He come and rain righteousness upon you. Ye have plowed wickedness, ye have reaped iniquity; ye have eaten the fruit of lies; because thou didst trust in thy way, in the multitude of thy mighty men." It's time for you to break up fallow ground.

What is fallow ground? It is ground that has lain idle, and infested with stumps. It's got to be broken up; it's got to be prepared to receive the seed. Isaiah in the 40th chapter, verses 6-8, says, "The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field! The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever."

All flesh is as grass, and it has to be withered. Will you hear me? My Lord Jesus Christ enters only a broken heart. Psalm 34:18 says: "The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit." It seems that old David had not caught up with our new theology which says, "No use being sorry for your sins, no need of quitting your sins, no need of this repentance business," but he says that the Lord is nigh unto those that have a broken heart and He saves those that are contrite. Psalm 51:16-17: "Thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it." Simply going up to the temple, putting in my offering, partaking of the ordinance, will not satisfy the Lord. David said, if it would, I would surely do that, but that will not satisfy. "Thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."

So, my friends, there must be a work of the Holy Spirit in your life and mine. The mountains of our pride, of our boastfulness and our self-confidence must be brought low. The deep depressions and the things that are hidden from view, the filth of our mouths, the stories that spew forth from the venom of our souls, our slanderous tongues, our harsh sayings, the cesspools of our hearts must be filled up. The crooked ways, the little trimming of corners, the little falsifying the truth, the little deceit, must be made smooth. Isaiah 57:15: "For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity Whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

The Lord says He's particular about where He lives, and He says He does not come in to take up His dwelling place except in a contrite and a humble heart. Has the Lord's Spirit plowed your old wicked heart and brought you to the place of coming clean with Him? May God speak to your heart!

*"Blessed Almighty God, we praise Thee that we can come to Thee in the precious Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We thank Thee for this message that the Holy Ghost led John the Baptist to preach. We pray that You will be pleased to speak to every person that reads this message, and show each one their true condition before Thee. Please bring some to a full surrender unto our Lord Jesus Christ, that they will find salvation in Him. Speak to Your children and revive us again, that we may glorify Christ, to Whom belongs all honor, glory and praise, both now and forever. Amen!"*

Anytime we are not doing what God tells us to do in His Word, we are not led of God. "Just one life, 'Twill soon be past; Only what's done for Christ will last!"