

Harmony Of The Gospels -- Lesson #5

The Beginning Of John The Baptist's Ministry

Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 2:1-2; 3:3-18

I. **The Time Of The Beginning**

- A. While the other three gospels take a brief survey of the preparation of the gospel, Mark looks particularly to the period when it began to be preached. The gospel began to be preached or proclaimed with the ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 16:16).
- B. Tiberius Caesar, stepson of and successor to Augustus, began to reign as joint ruler with Augustus in August, A.U.C. 765 (A.D. 11). On August 19, 767, Augustus died and Tiberius became the sole ruler.
 - 1. Luke counts from the beginning of the joint rule, and his fifteen years bring us to 779.
 - 2. In August, 779, Tiberius began his fifteenth year, and about December of that year Jesus would have completed His thirtieth year.
- C. Tiberius was born in 41 B.C. and died on March 16, A.D. 37. As a citizen he distinguished himself as an orator, soldier and public official. But as emperor he was slothful, self-indulgent, licentious, vindictive and cruel. He was cunning and was a curse to his people.
- D. Herod was also known as Antipas. "Tetrarch" means that he was the ruler over a fourth part of a country. He was the ruler who murdered John the Baptist. His half brother Philip was distinguished by his justice and moderation; he was the one decent man in the Herodian family. His notable accomplishments include marrying Herodias and building Caesarea Philippi.
- E. Annas had been high priest A.D. 7-14, when he was deposed by the procurator, Gratus. Caiaphas was the son-in-law of and successor to Annas.
 - 1. Luke gives the name of the rightful and the acting high priest.
 - 2. In the last 107 years of the temple's existence there were 28 high priests.
- F. Luke is the only one who fixes the time when Jesus began His ministry. He locates it by emperor and governor, tetrarch and high priest, as an event of worldwide importance (cf. Acts 26:26).

II. **The Message And The Messenger**

- A. John was called the "Baptist" because God first gave through him the ordinance of baptism. John was a link between the Old and the New Testament. Belonging to the Old, he announced the New. His preach-

ing was brief and unembellished. Its force lay in the importance of the truth announced.

- B. To repent is to change the will in reference to sin, resolving to sin no more. John sets forth the motive for repentance. Repentance is the duty, and the approach of the kingdom is the motive inciting to it. Only by repentance could the people be prepared for the kingdom.
- C. The term "kingdom of heaven" is peculiar to Matthew, who uses it 31 times. There are enough parallels among the synoptic gospels to imply that "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" denote the same thing.
- D. Mark says little about the prophets, but at the outset of his gospel he calls attention to the fact that the entire pathway of Jesus was the subject of prophetic prediction. The prophecy of Isaiah's had to relate only to John, for no other prophet ever made the wilderness the scene of his preaching. But John always preached there, and instead of going to the people he compelled the people to come out to him.
- E. Isaiah's language pictured a band of workmen preparing a road for their king through a rough, mountainous area. The real preparation was the transformation of repentance. By inducing repentance, John was to prepare the people to receive Jesus and His apostles, and to obey to their preaching.
- F. Locusts, like Western grasshoppers, were extremely plentiful. The Law declared them clean, and thus permitted the people to eat them for food (Leviticus 11:22). Many of the trees in the plains of Jericho such as the palm, fig, ash and tamarisk exuded sweet gums which went by the name of tree honey. The country also once abounded in wild bees, and their honey was very plentiful.
- G. Both Matthew and Luke show that some did not accept John's baptism (Matthew 11:23-25; Luke 7:30). On both sides of the river between the lake of Galilee and Jericho, there were many important cities, any one of which would be more apt to send its citizens to John's baptism than the proud capital of Jerusalem.
- H. In every stage of the Greek language the word "baptize" means "to immerse." John's baptism was instituted by God (John 1:33), just as Christian baptism was instituted by Christ (Matthew 28:19). As John's baptism was for the remission of sins, it was proper that it should be preceded by a confession of sins (cf. Acts 19:18; 1 John 1:9). Christian baptism calls only for a confession in Christ (Matthew 10:32-33; Romans 10:9-10).

III. **A Specimen Of John's Preaching**

- A. John spoke primarily to the religious leaders of the day, but his condemnation indirectly included the multitude who followed their leadership.
 - 1. The "viper" was extremely poisonous (Acts 28:6; Isaiah 59:5).
 - 2. The figure means that the Jewish rulers were full of guile and malice, cunning and venom.
- B. With these words John gave them a strong rebuke, The serpent is an emblem of the devil, and Jesus not only repeated John's words (Matthew 12:35; 23:23, 33), but He interpreted the words, and told them plainly that they were "the children of the devil" (John 8:44).
- C. To all of John's hearers he preached the coming kingdom; to the impenitent he preached the coming wrath of God. The Bible has a voice of warning and condemnation, as well as a voice of invitation and love.
- D. The "fruits" of repentance means the manner of life which shows a real repentance. The Jews thought that the Messiah would rule over them as a nation, and that all Jews would, therefore, be by birthright citizens of His kingdom. They thought that descent from Abraham was all that would be necessary to bring them into that kingdom. John's words must have been very surprising to them.
- E. Their pride was more inexcusable because the Jews were clearly warned by their prophets that their privileges were not exclusive, and that they would by no means escape just punishment for their sins (Jeremiah 7:3-4; Micah 3:11).
 - 1. The New Testament teaches us that we are children of Abraham by faith, and not by blood; by spiritual and not carnal descent (Romans 4:12-16; Galatians 3:26; 6:15).
 - 2. It had been better for the Jews never to have heard of Abraham than to have falsely viewed the rights which they inherited from him.
- F. John answered the cry, "What must we do then?" by recommending them to do the very reverse of what they were doing, which, in their case, was true fruit of repentance.
 - 1. Two tunics were a luxury in a land where thousands were too poor to own even one.
 - 2. Wrath was coming, and he that would obtain mercy from it must show mercy (Matthew 5:7).
 - 3. A similar injunction is given to Christians elsewhere (2 Corinthians 8:13-15; James 2:15-17; 1 John 3:17).
- G. The Greeks regarded the word "publican" as synonymous with "plunderer." Suidas pictures the life of a publican as "unrestrained plunder, unblushing greed, shameless business." Being publicly condemned,

and therefore continually conscious of their sin, the publicans repented more readily than the self-righteous Pharisees.

IV. **John The Baptist's Picture Of The Messiah**

- A. "Unto repentance" means "unto the completion of your repentance." Repentance had to begin before baptism was administered.
 - 1. John preached repentance because of a coming King; he now announces the identity of the King.
 - 2. Malachi binds together in one time the appearing of both forerunner and judge (Malachi 3:1-3).
- B. The sandal was a piece of wood or leather bound to the sole of the foot to protect it from the burning sand or sharp stones. To untie or carry away the shoe of the master or his guest was the work of the lowest slave of the household (cf. Psalm 60:8). John here means that he is not worthy to be His servant.
- C. In the early church there was an abundant outpouring of the Spirit of God (Titus 3:5-6; Acts 2:3-4, 17; 10:44). The prophecy of baptism in the Holy Spirit began to be fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 2:4).
- D. Many regard the expression "in fire" as an amplification of spiritual baptism. However, the context forbids this, for in vs. 10, casting the unfruitful trees into the fire represents the punishment of the wicked, and in vs. 12, the burning of the chaff with fire does the same. Consequently, the baptizing in fire of the intervening verse must, according to the context, have the same reference.
- E. The "fan" was a winnowing shovel used to toss the chaff and the wheat into the air so the wind could carry the chaff away. "In his hand" means that it was ready for immediate work.
 - 1. Eastern garners or granaries were usually subterranean vaults or caves. Garnered grain rested in safety.
 - 2. To prevent chaff from being blown back and mixed again with the wheat, it was burned up.
- F. Although the reference to "fire" will also fit with eternal judgment, John probably has reference to the judgment on the nation and is warning them against their rejection of Jesus. This message dovetails with the closing words of the Old Testament. Malachi ends with a prediction of the coming of John and of fearful judgment (Malachi 4:1-2, 5).
- G. The final verse serves as a summary. It embodied the substance of John's preaching. Afterwards John preached Christ more directly (John 1:29-36). The "good tidings" were good only to those who, by repentance, made themselves pleasing to God.