

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 11 – Jesus Begins His Public Ministry

Key Questions:

- How did Jesus begin His public ministry? How did people know He was really from God?

John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus (Luke 3:1-20)

John the Baptist was the cousin of Jesus (the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth – see *Part 9*). He was a remarkable person who dressed in clothes made from camel skin, ate honey and locusts (Matthew 3:4) and lived in the desert preaching about God's kingdom and baptising people in water. No wonder people came in large numbers to see this man!

The Historical setting (verses 1-2a)

Luke takes his usual care to put the events of this chapter in a historical context – verses 1 and 2 tell us the names of seven rulers and leaders who were responsible for four levels of government:

1. *Tiberius Caesar* – the Roman Emperor
2. *Pontius Pilate* – the Roman governor of Judea (the area in the south of Palestine around Jerusalem)
3. *Herod, Philip and Lysanius* – tetrarchs (rulers of the three other areas around Palestine). Herod and Philip were sons of Herod the Great (who was king when Jesus was born), while Lysanius ruled over Abilene from 14-29 AD. The "Herod" mentioned here was called more fully Herod Antipas, and he ruled over Galilee, the region where Jesus grew up.
4. *Annas and Caiaphas* – the High Priest(s) of the Jewish people. Although the Jews were ruled by the Romans, the High Priests had great influence over the people, as they were in charge of the worship in the Temple.

These names, and the date of the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius, put the date for these events at 28-29 AD.

John's Calling (verses 2b-6)

John's ministry was very important in God's plan. Luke shows this in two ways:

- a) John's message came from God (verse 2b) – John was a prophet just like in the Old Testament times
- b) John fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies of Isaiah (verses 4-6)

John's Message (verses 3, 7-18)

There are several key themes in John's message:

1. *Judgement* (verse 7) – God is going to judge people. John warned the people that they needed to be ready before the day when He does this. In particular, John warned people who thought they had a good relationship with God simply because they were Jews (verse 8). What they really needed was a personal relationship with God – they must seek Him.
2. *Repentance* (verses 3, 8-14) – John called people to repent – to turn from their sins to ask God for forgiveness (verse 3). The message of the Bible shows very clearly that we have done wrong before God, and we need His forgiveness. Repentance means to be sorry for doing wrong, and real repentance will show itself in a person's actions, for example:
 - a. Giving to people in need (verses 10-11)
 - b. Being honest in our work (verses 12-14)
 As a sign of their repentance, John baptised the people (to baptise means to immerse them in water).
3. *The Messiah* (verses 15-18) – People asked John if he was the Messiah God had promised, but he explained that He was not. John said four important things about the Messiah:
 - a. He is coming soon (verse 16)
 - b. He will be much greater than John (verse 16)
 - c. He will baptise "with the Holy Spirit" (verse 16) – in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit sometimes helped God's people to serve Him, but the Messiah will bring a new kind of relationship with Him.
 - d. He will judge people – He will also baptise with fire (verse 16). In the Bible fire is a picture of judgement, and John explains that the Messiah will judge people, separating them out like grain and chaff (verse 17).

John gives way to Jesus

John's identity (John 1:19-28)

The Jewish leaders wanted to know who John claimed he was (verse 20) and what right he had to baptise people (verse 25). They asked if he was the great prophet Elijah returned, or the great prophet spoken about in the Old Testament, or if he claimed to be the Messiah. John denied that he was any of these three, but he did claim that he was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy about the forerunner of the Messiah (verse 23), and said that the one he was preparing the way for was actually standing in the crowd amongst them (verse 26).

John baptises Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus came to John to be baptised by him. John did not want to baptise Jesus, because he knew that Jesus had no sin and did not need to repent, but Jesus insisted. Jesus wanted to be baptised not because He needed to repent, but to identify with John's ministry and to set an example (Jesus said "we must do everything that is right", verse 15). During His baptism John saw the Holy Spirit settling on Jesus and heard God the Father describe Jesus as His Son with whom He was "fully pleased" (it seems that only John and Jesus saw the dove and heard the voice from Heaven). This is another example of the three persons of God being in one place, and also tells us that Jesus was unique – the Son of God who had no sin. It was this that convinced John that Jesus really was the Messiah and the Son of God. So, Jesus' baptism:

1. Identified Jesus with John's ministry – Jesus would continue on from John
2. Proved (to John) that Jesus was God's sinless Son
3. Marked the beginning of Jesus' public ministry – it introduced Him to the people

John points people to follow Jesus (John 1:29-34)

This event happened after Jesus was baptised by John (possibly the following day). John spoke out about Jesus and told the people that:

- (i) *Jesus is far greater than John because He existed long before him* (verse 30)
- (ii) *Jesus was the one John was waiting for (the Messiah)* (verse 32-34) – this was revealed to John by God Himself when He spoke from Heaven at Jesus' baptism.
- (iii) *Jesus is the Son of God* (verse 34)
- (iv) *Jesus is the "Lamb of God", who takes away the sin of the world* (verse 29) – this is a prophecy about why Jesus came to earth. In the Old Testament system of sacrifices a lamb was killed by the priest as a sacrifice for the sin of the people. John is predicting that Jesus will die as a sacrifice for the sin of the whole world! The people (and most probably John himself) did not understand this at the time.

John gives way to Jesus (John 3:22-36)

After Jesus was baptised by John He began to call disciples to follow Himself and He and His disciples even began baptising people (verse 22). John's followers were confused and disappointed that Jesus was becoming more popular than John (verse 26). John, however, was not disappointed. He knew that he had done the work that God had given him to do – his job had been to prepare the way for the Messiah (verses 27-29). From now on John's ministry would give way to Jesus, and the people began to follow Jesus instead of John. John the Baptist summarised it like this:

He must become greater and greater, and I must become less and less. He has come from above and is greater than anyone else. I am of the earth, and my understanding is limited to the things of earth, but he has come from heaven ... He is sent by God. He speaks God's words, for God's Spirit is upon Him without measure or limit. (John 3:30-34)

John was later arrested by King Herod Antipas because he spoke out against the corruption of Herod's rule (see Luke 3:19-20). Herod eventually had John beheaded (see Mark 6:17-29) but before this John sent his followers to meet Jesus. Jesus sent a message reassuring John that He really was the Messiah (see Luke 7:18-35). Jesus said that John was the greatest prophet who ever spoke from God, but that even the least person in the Kingdom of God would be greater than John.

Jesus is tested and found to be sinless (Luke 4:1-13)

The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of His public ministry. After this He went into the desert for 40 days, where He fasted. At the end of the forty days, when Jesus was very hungry, the Devil spoke to Him. The Devil (or Satan) is the enemy of God, who tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. His mission is to lead people away from God, and one way he does this is to tempt them to do what is wrong. In the case of Jesus, Satan attacked Him in three ways:

1. **To turn a stone into bread** – Satan chose this temptation at a time when Jesus was hungry. Jesus answered with a quote from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 8:3), saying that people need more than just bread to live.
2. **To worship Satan in return for all the kingdoms of earth** – Jesus again quoted the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:13), saying that people should only worship God.
3. **To jump off the Temple** – Satan was very clever this time, and quoted from the Old Testament himself, quoting a promise of God from Psalm 91:11-12 that God would protect the person who trusts in Him with His angels. Jesus, however, refused, quoting an Old Testament command saying that it is wrong to test God (Deuteronomy 6:16). Satan had tried to twist God's word to tempt Jesus, but Jesus was true to God's word.

These temptations cover three major areas of sin for human beings:

1. **Selfishness** – Jesus refused to perform a miracle to fulfil His own needs. He was able to control his natural desires (in this case hunger) and do what was right at all times.
2. **Greed** – Jesus refused to take all the power and riches the world can offer. He recognised that man's first responsibility is to worship God and honour Him.
3. **Pride** – Jesus refused to test God by acting in a proud way. He realised that God's promises are not given to allow us to do what we want or boast, but that we should trust God, not test Him. Trusting God does not mean demanding that He does what we want but surrendering to Him and obeying what He wants.

These three things really describe one thing, which is the very centre of sin: the rejection of God as our King – **sin is when human beings reject God's rule and worship other things in His place**. Every other human being has fallen on each of these tests. Only Jesus, the Son of God, could resist. More importantly, we cannot say that we have always trusted God and worshipped Him – only Jesus could do that. This episode proved that Jesus was exactly who Satan had thought He might be, the Son of God. We are sinners who need God's forgiveness, but Jesus is the sinless Son of God who came to save us from our sin. The claim that Jesus was sinless is found throughout the New Testament:

- **Jesus himself claimed it:** "*Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?*" (John 8:46)
- **John claimed it:** "*there is no sin in Him*" (1 John 3:5)
- **Peter claimed it:** "*He never sinned, and he never deceived anyone*" (1 Peter 2:22)
- **Paul claimed it:** "*Christ, who never sinned*" (11 Corinthians 5:21)

This claim that Jesus was completely sinless is vital to understanding His mission. If He was not sinless He could not be the perfect sacrifice for sins and His claims to be God were false. Because He did not sin, He must be God, and His death is able to be the one sacrifice for our sins forever.

Key Lesson: Jesus was the sinless Son of God come to restore God's Kingdom

John was the last and greatest prophet pointing forward to the Messiah. He handed on his ministry to Jesus, telling people that He was the Messiah, the Son of God and the Lamb of God. Jesus was tested by Satan in the desert and proved to be completely sinless. Jesus was unique among human beings. We are sinners – He is the sinless Saviour.