Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Setting the Stage for Jesus, Part 2
Scripture: Luke 3:2-3
Code: 42-36

It is again our great privilege to open the Bible, this morning, and to hear the Word of God from the third chapter of Luke, Luke chapter 3. We are at a monumental point in the gospel of Luke, the story of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are at the point in Luke chapter 3 where the ministry of Jesus is about to begin. Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Deliverer of Israel began His ministry publicly at a time when Israel's condition was most desperate and He was most needed. And Luke wants us to understand that.

Without giving us a lot of detail, in fact without giving us any detail, he opens this third chapter launching the ministry of John and Jesus with seven names, knowing that we would explore those names and find out the setting and the scene at the time when the Messiah began His public ministry. These names are filled with historical significance, spiritual significance and they create for us a marvelous historical setting to understand the ministry of John and the ministry of Jesus.

In general, the five names given in verse 1 of chapter 3 are all Gentiles, they're all non-Jews. And they tell us that the people of God and their land was under the power and control of pagans, idolaters with disdain for Jehovah and for the Jews. The two names in verse 2, Annas and Caiaphas who were the high priests, also tell us about the religious condition of Israel at the time, for they were corrupt, perverse, apostate leaders. Given the highest spiritual responsibility in the land, they were the basest of men.

And when you look at these seven names, as Luke knows any Bible student will, you begin to see the darkness of the time when the Lord began His ministry. It was a time of corruption. It was a time of wickedness. It was a time of hypocrisy. It was a time of legalism. It was a time when the nation desperately needed to repent, and that's why in verse 3, "The word of God came to John, John began his ministry," and in verse 4, "He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." The great need in the land of Israel was for spiritual revival. The great need was for repentance and forgiveness.

It was the darkest of times politically. It was the darkest of times religiously. It was the darkest of times spiritually. The people were under the political power of pagan idolaters. The people were under the religious influence of wicked high priests. The people were under the spiritual pervasive dominance of a legalistic, hypocritical form of religion. Desperate times call for desperate measures. This is part of what the apostle Paul calls "the fullness of times." When Bible students study

Galatians 4 and the statement that God sent forth His Son in the fullness of time, you can understand a lot of things about what made it the fullness of time, Roman roads had been built everywhere in the known world and therefore there was a very easy way for the gospel to be spread. The Roman peace had basically leveled every wall and opened every border so that again the gospel could be spread over the world, as it were.

But also, it was a crucial time in the nation Israel. They had not any realization of Abrahamic Covenant promise. They were not in the land that God had given to Abraham. And they were being literally oppressed and held in bondage by Gentiles who had the real power over the land that was promised to them. It was not a time for blessing, it was a time of suffering and of pain, and a time of bondage.

And they certainly weren't enjoying what had been promised to David in the Davidic Covenant. They did not have a kingdom and a King in the line of David, they had no king of their own. And they not only did not have their own kingdom, but they weren't ruling over the rest of the world and influencing others. None of the promises to Abraham and David seemed to have been realized.

Even the promises made to Jeremiah and Ezekiel in what was called the New Covenant, they did not enjoy. They didn't even enjoy a true salvation, true forgiveness, the granting of the Holy Spirit because the nation as such was engulfed in legalism and hypocrisy.

So the conditions were as bad as they could be and they had been that way for hundreds of years, for a long, long time. The Old Testament had finished with the promise that the sun of righteousness would arise with healing in His beams. And the Old Testament closed with the hope of the Messiah, but four hundred-plus years had gone by and there is no Messiah and Gentile power is becoming more and more and more entrenched. The Jews are sort of hoping against hope that they will get Abrahamic Covenant blessing, that they will get Davidic Covenant blessing, New Covenant blessing. The realities of the promises of God will come to pass, but where is the Savior? Where is the Deliverer? Where is the Messiah?

Well, He's about to break upon the scene. Thirty years of privacy are about to end. His public ministry will begin before...His public ministry begins about six months earlier, the public ministry of John, His forerunner, the last Old Testament prophet, the one who will prepare the people for the Messiah and present Messiah to the people begins his ministry, and that's where we are in chapter 3.

It says, "In the fifteenth year in the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee and his brother Philip was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness."

John was called by that word from God, called into his prophetic ministry which he had been waiting for for thirty years. Now that the private life is going to go public and soon after the very private life of Jesus will go public, as well.

In presenting to us all these names, Luke is giving us the historical setting. Down in verse 3 he will give us the geographical setting, and then he will give us the spiritual setting also in verse 3, and then verses 4 to 6 the prophetical setting. The drama is about to unfold. But before the main characters come center stage, we have to set the scenery and that is what Luke does so well. He gives more attention to this in a concise way and yet in a comprehensive way than any of the other gospel writers. He really does set the scene. He paints the backdrop, as it were, he weaves the tapestry that provides the scenery for us for the arrival of John and Jesus. And it is a rich backdrop, it is a tapestry that is going to demonstrate for us something of the wonder of the arrival of John and Jesus. But in order to really allow that to have its full impact, we have to take a look at the scenery before we see the main characters and what they do when they step on stage.

You can read those two verses in a matter of seconds, as I had done, and you can pass by those names but you would miss so much that establishes the environment for the ministry of Jesus and leads inevitably to the execution of John and the execution of Jesus. Sad, sad way to treat the revelation of God that you've been waiting for for hundreds and hundreds of years, but that is the sad reality. And just the mention of names like Caesar, Pontius Pilate, and Herod, Annas and Caiaphas catapult you immediately to the other end of the life of Christ and His own death because those people play a role in that.

It's a dark night then in the land as Jesus comes to begin His public ministry, as John comes some months before Jesus to announce that He's coming and to get the people ready. But, you know, the darkest night is usually right before the dawn and in order that we might see the brightness of the light of Jesus, the backdrop of darkness needs to be carefully understood.

Israel has no true king. Oh they had lots of petty kings, lots of tetrarchs. They are small-time kings, petty kings, but it has no true king, it has no king from the loins of David, none to whom the kingdom really belongs. It has no unity as a nation, it is fragmented, it is split up into four parts, one ruled by Pontius Pilate, one by Herod, one by Philip and one by Lysanias. And all of that is under the power of Tiberius Caesar who has really unilateral power to do whatever he wants to do across the great Roman Empire.

There is no true religion. The high priests, Annas and Caiaphas, are corrupt. The priesthood is divided into fragments. There are legalistic, hypocritical priests called Pharisees and there are liberal anti-supernaturalist priests called Sadducees. There is no real spiritual leadership and there's very little hope for change. It's been a long time, no prophet, no word from God, and no Messiah and

that's the background.

For us to get a deeper understanding of that we need only to look at the names because history does provide for us some information and we did that last time, let me just very briefly kind of reestablish it in your mind. Luke is going to give us the historical setting, the geographical setting, the theological or spiritual setting, and then prophetical setting. But he starts with the historical and we looked at that last time. And that unfolds in the seven names in verses 1 and 2.

First of all, in verse 1 you have five characters mentioned, all are non-Jews and all rule in Israel. They all have some measure of power. Tiberius Caesar, of course, having the great power as the Caesar who is literally over the entire Roman Empire. But under Caesar comes these four rulers who are ruling in Israel. The reason for that is because Herod the Great, the Idumaean king who ruled the whole land, before he died in 4 B.C. just some time after the birth of Christ, before Herod died he asked that the Romans would split his kingdom into four parts and give one part to each of his four sons. And they did that, believing, or course, that they could gain what they needed out of the sons of Herod, they put them in place and they became tetrarchs which means a ruler over a fourth.

Now remember something about this. The first one was Archelaus. Herod dies in 4 B.C., so Archelaus steps in. Herod, just as a note, was an Idumaean, not a Jew. He was given power by Rome and he ruled for 36 years. And when he died they split the kingdom in four parts. The first part went to his son Archelaus who was a vicious, wicked, brutal man. He takes power in 4 B.C., ten years later in 6 A.D. he is deposed and he was deposed, he was ruling Judea which is where Jerusalem is, north of that Samaria, south of that Idumaea, the main populated part of the land was his area. He's deposed in a ten year span from 4 B.C. to 6 A.D., he is deposed. In his place the Romans put a series of five prefects, they were called. The fifth one is Pontius Pilate. He rules from the year 26 which is precisely the fifteenth year from the reign of Tiberius Caesar, so he came into power right at this time, till 36. He rules a ten-year span. The ministry of Jesus was a three-year span, so he was there through the ministry of Jesus, of course. He was very, very much a player in the death of Jesus and then ruled for some time after that. So he gets one of those sections, the main section which once belonged to Archelaus who was deposed.

The second section went to a man called Herod, that's Herod Antipas his official name. He took over Galilee, the north, and Peraea, a section as well in the north. And he reigned a long time 42 years, also a wicked man. He covers the entire ministry of Jesus. His reign starts in 4 B.C. and goes all the way for 42 years through the entire time of Jesus. So when in the life of Jesus you're referring to Herod, that's the Herod being referred to, Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, also a wicked man who beheaded John the Baptist.

The third mentioned is Philip. He is another son of Herod. He was, I suppose you could say, the best of a bad lot. They were all pretty bad, he was the best of the bad. He ruled from 4 B.C. for about 38

years, until 34 A.D., ruling again in an area in the north called Ituraea and Trachonitis.

The fourth section is ruled by a man named Lysanias about whom we know very little, except he did live at that time. There's another name by the same name who lived a lot earlier and died in 34 to 36 B.C., being killed by Marc Antony, but this is another Lysanias who ruled in the fourth area.

So you've got the land all fragmented, all cut up, all by petty monarchs who do whatever they want to do to exact upon the people whatever they want to exact, who really have a sort of unassailable power who are basically wicked, evil, idolatrous people. All these petty monarchs in Israel are under the sovereign power of the immensely dominant and sovereign Caesar Tiberius, successor to Augustus, who came into rule in the year 11 A.D. And so fifteen years later, this is about 26 A.D. He ruled all the way to 37 A.D. so he had a long rule from 11 to 37.

Now this is an idolatrous environment and that's what Luke wants us to understand. It is wicked. It is idolatrous. It is a horrible plight for the Jewish people. And, you know, the Jewish people, they don't even want to acknowledge this, as much as this chafes and irritates them that they...that this is their land, this is God's land, Jerusalem is the apple of God's eye, this should be God's land and God's people and what are these uncircumcised, wicked Gentiles do controlling all of it...doing controlling all of it? This was a terrible thing for them to endure. And in some ways they wouldn't even admit it. In John 8 they said to Jesus, "We have never been in bondage to any man." What a ridiculous statement that was. That was not reality. But it reminds me of the story of the little girl who wouldn't sit down in the car and her father said, "Sit down, sit down," and finally he smacked her leg and she sat down and looked at him and said, "I'm sitting down, but I'm standing up in my heart."

The reality of the condition was they were under Gentile control but in the heart they wouldn't acknowledge it. We're not in bondage to any man. We are a people only answerable to God was what they were holding out for in the heart. But the reality was they despised this Gentile occupation and this fragmenting of their land under these whimsical, wicked rulers. And they didn't like idolatry and the Roman world was filled with idols, including Caesar who was a god by his own designation and to be worshiped as a god, as deity, and that caused no end of problems for them. Here was Caesar, the ultimate ruler of Israel, who himself was taking a place reserved only for Jehovah and violation of the first command to have no other gods.

Now in all honesty, the Jews weren't always so good about despising idolatry. In fact, we remember back in the history of Israel in the Old Testament they engaged in all kinds of idolatrous practices. They were judged repeatedly by God for their idolatry. They were split...the kingdoms were split, you remember, after Solomon. The unified kingdom was under Saul, David, Solomon, and after Solomon the kingdom split, the northern kingdom known as Israel, the southern kingdom known as Judah, made up of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin, all the other ten tribes in the north. There never was a good king in the whole northern kingdom, the whole kingdom engaged in idolatry and eventually in

722 B.C. was conquered by the Assyrians who took them captive and they never came back. So idolatry had wiped out the northern kingdom.

It wasn't long after that that the southern kingdom, engaging also in idolatry, was judged by God, 586 B.C. the Babylonians came, destroyed the country, destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and took them captive there. Seventy years later the southern kingdom, Judah, God allowed to return from captivity. Seventy years later they came back. They were led back by Zerubbabel when Cyrus, the Babylonian king, gave them their release. They came back, built the city, built the walls and reestablished the nation. Never again have they engaged in idolatry. They were basically cured from idolatry by the Babylonian captivity. They got the message, the price was infinitely high. They saw what happened to the northern kingdom, Israel, which never returned. They saw what happened in the south and they hated idols. Their religion wasn't true, it was legalistic, superficial, ceremonial. Their hearts were far from God. They had a zeal for God but not according to knowledge. And that's why Paul said he wished himself accursed for the true salvation of Israel, but at least they were not idolatrous. And so the occupation of Romans dragging in all their symbols of idolatry, chafed on them...and they despised all of that.

Where was the promise of God to Abraham for their own land and their own blessings? Where was the promise of God to David for their own King and their own Kingdom? They had been slaves to the Gentiles for many, many years, all the way back to the Greeks, all the way back to the Persians when they were in Babylon. And after that, when they finally got back in the land, the Greeks conquered them and, of course, they desecrated the holy place, the sanctuary and Gentile rule had continued since then.

They were occupied. They were oppressed. They were in bondage to the most powerful, most perverse and most petty of Gentile idolaters. This is a hard time, dark, dark, dark times. None of the promises for which they had waited so long even look possible.

As if that's not bad enough, we come to verse 2 and it says, "In the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..." and, folks, that opens up a whole proverbial can of worms. You know, it's such a wonderful thing when you study the Bible, you read those names and they're just names. But Luke knows and the Holy Spirit knows that we're going to dig a little deeper and we're going to find out an awful lot about what that tells us. And knowing these kinds of things makes the drama of the life of John and Jesus all the more wonderful.

Now there was only supposed to be one high priest...just one. But now we have the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas. This is not according to the pattern that God had originally established where there would be one high priest and that high priest would have come through the Levitical line, that is he would be one out of the tribe of Levi who inherited the right to be a priest and was then chosen to be high priest. But during Roman times the Levitical line was ignored. During Roman

times the Romans appointed the priests, the high priests. They had to approve of and appoint the high priests. So what that meant was that you became high priest by somehow currying the favor of Rome.

We don't know anything about the lineage of Annas. We don't know anything about the lineage of Caiaphas, really. They were in the position they were in because they had somehow gotten the favor of Rome and been placed there. It is even said by some historians that the office of high priest was often bought with money, or granted as some kind of political favor.

So, Annas had garnered that favor from Rome and he was in that place because he served Rome's purposes, not God's. It wasn't that he was a priest truly or that he was in the priestly line. We don't know any of that background. But it was that he was there because he served the purposes of Rome well.

Now in some ways Annas, who is mentioned first here, who is the older of the two, had a death grip on the high priesthood. Now remember this. Caesar was the most powerful figure in the world. The four rulers of the segmented land of Palestine had a certain amount of power in the area they were in, they were sort of delegated to them by Caesar. But the real power over the Jewish people was not Gentile power, that was only the threat of power, that was only the terrible invasion of idolatry and a certain kind of mental bondage. The real power exerted over the people of Israel on a day-to-day basis was exerted by the most powerful man in their recognized structure, and that would be the high priest. He was the real power because he represented, theoretically, God. And what he brought to bear on them was not an intrusion into their life, but was reflective of what God had ordained, and that is that they be ruled by priests and a high priest. So he represented the leadership they could accept and had to accept by virtue of its ordination by God, even though in this case it had been terribly, terribly corrupted.

So whoever was in that place really had the day-to-day power. Sure the Romans exacted taxes which the Jewish people hated. The Romans hired Jews would be considered as traitors and outcasts who would operate Roman tax franchises for a price. They literally sold themselves to Rome to extort money from their people for an oppressing occupying nation. They were the worst of the worst among the Jewish people by the admission of the Jews themselves. They were considered as the worst.

And so the Romans did bring some terrible things to bear on the Jewish people, but nothing really as bad as the priests because of the power that was inherent in being the priest. Now Annas had a death grip on the high priesthood. He was high priest from the year 7 to 14 A.D., 7 to 14 A.D. During the silent years, the private years of John and Jesus, during those 30 years when Jesus was living in Nazareth and John was out in the wilderness, 7 to 14 A.D., just a...not a long period of time, but he was succeeded in the priesthood by five sons and one son-in-law. That son-in-law is Caiaphas.

So, as I said, he had a death grip on the priesthood by virtue of the fact that behind the scenes he controlled everything. It was really Annas, that's why he's constantly identified as the high priest. When you go to John 18 and they go and arrest Jesus, they arrest Jesus and they say, "We've got to take Him to Annas first." It says, "Caiaphas was the high priest that year, but they took Him to Annas first." He was the real power behind the priesthood. And the priesthood was not just a position, not just a position of spiritual leadership, it was...it was a crime family is what it was. It was the Jerusalem mafia, that's what it was. And the mafioso boss was Annas. He still had the power. He probably maintained the title all his life. It would be like an American President who will always be President Carter, President Reagan, President Nixon, President Ford, or whatever. Till they die they always bear the title. Apparently the high priest would always bear the title of respect because, after all, there was no higher ranking in the land than that and that was a title of dignity and people were always to be known by that title. So he would always be the high priest in terms of title because he once held it.

But the fact of the matter is it wasn't just a titular designation, the fact is he ran everything and that's indicative...that's indicated, I should say, when they took Jesus first to Annas before they went to Caiaphas who was the high priest because they knew that Annas had the final say and if it didn't get by him, no use going anywhere else.

Now the basic operation of the high priesthood was conducted in the temple and it was tremendously lucrative. They managed, Annas and his sons and son-in-law, they managed to turn the high priesthood into an incredibly profitable business. And I...just as a footnote...I've been studying this particularly in the last few weeks, I just finished writing a book called The Murder of Jesuswhich will be out before Easter, in which I just take you clear through the whole story of the crucifixion. And in doing so I got very involved in the life of Annas and Caiaphas who played a major role, of course, in the execution of Jesus. In fact, if you want to lay the responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus at anybody's feet, you can start with God because God sent Him to die for sinners, and then you can move to Annas and Caiaphas, they drove the plot. They were the ones who cornered Pontius Pilate and had him in a position where in blackmail he had to do what he did and that was authorize the execution of Jesus. But they were the ones who drove the plot. And the reason they hated Jesus had a little to do with His theology and mostly to do with the fact that Jesus interrupted temple business.

When Jesus first showed up on the scene, He went to the temple and He made a whip and he cleaned out the place. You remember that? And then at the end of His ministry, He did it again. This did not make them happy. If you want to carry the analogy a little bit, what happened at the cross was they finally found a hit man to execute the guy who was intruding into their operation.

Now the business went something like this. When people came to the temple, they needed to do two things. They needed to give offerings and they needed to give sacrifices. The offerings could be a temple tax which was a certain amount that everybody paid. It could be an almsgiving. There were a number of fashions in which people gave, money to poor people, and there were other offerings that were given as a part of some ceremony, or some purification. There were required tithes, bringing all your tithes into the storehouse. They had to give what's called the Levite's tax, the ten percent of all their income for the year had to be given to the support of the Levites. They had to give another ten percent beyond that, a second tax. And then they had every ten...every three years they had to give ten percent so it breaks down to three and a third a year which they gave for the poor. Ten percent went to the Levites, ten percent went to fund the national festivals, and three and a third percent went to the poor. So they were giving about twenty-three percent of their income every year. They were putting it into coinage, into these receptacles in the temple. There were thirteen trumpet-shaped receptacles around the wall of the Court of the Women in the outer court, and they came and they gave their offerings. Some of the Pharisees, you remember, when they came they got a guy who blew a trumpet so everybody would watch them do it so they could parade their spirituality.

Now when they came to the temple to do that, the high priest, Annas, had developed very, very effective system. On every Roman coin, now remember now, Rome rules the world, so you have common coinage. All these people are coming in as pilgrims from all over the world, they're bringing Roman coins but every coin that Rome produced had stamped on it whose picture? Caesar. Matthew 22, Jesus pulls out a coin, He says to the people, "Whose picture is on this?" And they say Caesar's. That's an idol...that's an idol.

So, they would not allow anybody to deposit any Roman coins in any of the receptacles in the temple. You had to deposit the Jewish coin and so you had to get your coins changed and you could only get them changed from a temple licensed coin changer. So Annas can now charge whatever he wants to charge for that enterprise. It's like when you go to your own bank to get your own money out of your own bank and they charge you a dollar and a half to get your own money out of your own bank which is earning interest for them. Right? Only this was a lot worse than that. This was exorbitant, this was larceny, this was robbery. That's what they were doing. The people had absolutely no choice. This is a monopoly.

Now, for convenience sake they said there would be licensed coin changers, licensed by the high priest, all throughout the temple. And you remember that's what Jesus did. Who's table did He throw over? The money changers because they had taken the house of prayer and turned it into...what?...a den of thieves. That's what was going on, just stealing the people blind.

Now the other thing that a Jewish person had to do when they came to a ceremony or a festival at the temple was bring a sacrifice. Now there was a standard for that sacrifice, it needed to be without blemish sacrifice. So who's going to determine that? What's a blemish?

So, you're going to come in and you say, "Look, I think this lamb is without blemish." You're just a Jewish guy, you've come down from the Jordan Valley, you brought some little lamb and you say, "This is a good lamb, this is the best lamb I have in my flock. I've got a lot. I've checked them out. This is the best one." The guy in the temple says, "Ah, sorry, it doesn't pass inspection. See this little deal over here, no, that's a blemish. You're going to have to buy one of ours. Ours are pre-certified."

You know, pretty soon you're not going to drag your animals down from Galilee anymore because when you get down there you're just as liable to get turned down as not because the system works best with a temple enterprise if they certify everything and that just means yours doesn't qualify. So what they were doing basically was telling the people that their animals didn't qualify but that there were plenty of pre-certified animals and that's...there's some interesting thought that those sheep that Bethlehem shepherds kept so near to Jerusalem were the animals to be pre-certified for sacrifice, and that's actually who those shepherds were tending that night when the angel showed up to tell them the Lamb of God had been born. But they...they then could sell those pre-certified animals whether the person was going to buy a lamb or whether they were so poor they had to buy a bird, they would then be able to sell them for whatever they wanted because you had to have a certified animal so you had to pay whatever they want you to pay and you had larceny going on again.

So, they were just making a fortune and the high priest and his family were just cleaning off the profits. And Annas was behind this. He was the big boss. And he was running this entire system through his family. He really did function like an organized crime boss. And when Christ came in, He just turned everything over and cleaned the place out twice. This didn't make Him popular with Annas, or with Caiaphas.

Now Caiaphas was just a puppet of his father-in-law. He held office for 20 years, two decades. He was finally deposed the year 36, 37 A.D., so he started out about...a few years...his father-in-law was from 7 to 14, he takes over about 17, so another of the sons went kind of rapidly in there. Some of his sons were rapidly in that little few years there and that was pretty typical. The guy who followed Caiaphas in 36, 37 lasted 50 days as high priest. So that's indicative of the power behind the thing demanding a certain kind of performance at that office. So anyway, Caiaphas is in there for two decades and he's taken out of office 36, 37, so he is the high priest officially at the time of Jesus' public ministry, and he is in charge of part of the mock trial. Annas has part of it, Caiaphas has part of it that leads ultimately to the death of Jesus.

Just to give you another little interesting footnote. It's interesting to me, it may bore you to tears, but there's a...there's about a hundred years of Roman occupation, there's about a hundred years of actual Roman occupation, prior to that there was a Greek occupation, but about a hundred years of Roman occupation. And as best we can tell historically there were 28 high priests. So 28 high priests, you take 7, 8 years of Annas and 20 years of Caiaphas and you've got this say 30 years, so

you've got 26 left for a seventy-year period. So they ran through that office pretty fast. For a person to stay there 20 years was pretty remarkable. Caiaphas was there for 20 years.

Now Caiaphas from his theological standpoint was a Sadducee and Sadducees were religious liberals, they didn't believe in the supernatural, they didn't believe in angels, they didn't believe in the supernatural character of Scripture. It's easy to remember them because somebody says they didn't believe in angels, they didn't believe in the resurrection, they didn't believe in the supernatural character of Scripture, that's why they were so sad, you see. So that's how I remember them. It's not bad...it's not bad. They were materialists.

As I said, they were religious liberals. They...they were opportunists and because they were materialists and anti-supernaturalists, they were the kind of people who could run an enterprise like this in the temple and not worry that they were just going to be incinerated by God, turning His house of prayer into a den of thieves. They had a very, very low view of Scripture. Frankly, they were very much like modern Jews. They had a high view of tradition and a low view of Scripture. They were anti-supernaturalists. They were really sort of traditionalists rather than scriptural in their commitment.

These two men were the real power over the people and they were as wretched as wretched could be. They weren't any better than the pagans. So this is a very, very, very dark time in the land of Israel. They are apostates who blaspheme the God of Israel, really. They blaspheme the God of Israel right in God's own temple. I can't imagine those guys going to the Holy of Holies once a year, right?, on the Day of Atonement and wondering whether they'd ever come out. They were the ones who drove the conspiracy to execute Jesus because He tampered with their business and they couldn't agree with the Pharisees on anything except to kill Jesus. The Pharisees hated Jesus because He attacked their religious system. The Sadducees hated Jesus because He attacked their economic system. And they all got together and cornered Pilate and got Pilate to agree to execute Jesus with the threat that if he didn't they're going to complain again about Pilate to Tiberius Caesar, and Pilate was already on some serious thin ice because of things he had done in Israel.

So all these names are just filled with meaning. And as the story unfolds, they will play amazing parts in the drama that Luke records. It's a sorted world into which John steps. It's a sorted world into which Jesus comes. It's a sad and dark day. Political, religious, wickedness, machinations from the mind and hands of corrupt brutal apostate leaders. The whole list of names here just sort of..just sort of initiates thoughts of evil and intrigue and nepotism and manipulation and degeneracy and death. It's drama just filled in those names. That's the historical setting.

Now let me just briefly look at the geographical setting. This is really brief. Verse 3, "And he came into all the district around the Jordan." That's it...that's it. John came into all the district around the Jordan. You would think that the statement should read when it says in verse 2, "The word of God

came to John," that was the call to start his prophetic ministry, 30 years of privacy is over, John, you can't be wandering around out here in the desert anymore with a camel's hide garment and a belt around your waist eating locusts and wild honey, you can't be the wilderness man anymore. Time to launch your ministry. It should say, "And the word of the Lord came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness and he came into Jerusalem." I mean, that's what you think. Let's go where the people are, let's go in there and let's go talk to the people at the temple and let's get the word out that the Messiah is here. He's been born. He's going to be entering His ministry soon and you need to prepare your hearts, etc., etc. It doesn't say that.

He stayed exactly where he was. He had been there 30 years. Chapter 1 verse 80 tells us, that's the last we've heard of John. "He grew and became strong in spirit," talking about John. "He lived in the desert, or wilderness, till the day of his public appearance in Israel." There he's just a wilderness guy. He's out there in the wilderness, that is the wilderness of Judea, it's called, from the...I'll give you a little geography on Israel. There's a coastal plain, there's a Mediterranean Sea, and there's a coastal plain. There's a coastal range of mountains. The Sharon...the Carmel range, it's called. There's the Plain of Sharon which is a coastal...coastal lowland, a coastal valley, much like we have in California. And then you go inland a little bit and you have a range of mountains that was called Carmel, we talk about Mount Carmel, Carmel wasn't one mountain it was kind of a range of mountains. And then you had a valley and then you had another set of mountains on the east and that was where Jerusalem was, the high point, the plateau range, and then that fell off into the wilderness of Judea. And that wilderness extended across the Jordan River from the Dead Sea to the Sea of Galilee up the Jordan River was that wilderness area.

Now John's family lived in the hill country of Judea which would be the western border of that wilderness, which would go from the Dead...the top of the Dead Sea half way up to the Sea of Galilee to where the river Jabbok came in and it would go west of that and east of that. That is a very barren area. Today, of course, because they can pump irrigation into that, they have some crops out there but most of the good crops are on the north part of the Jordan Valley, up nearer to the Sea of Galilee. As you get down that thing very far it starts to become very, very, very barren. It's called the Great Rift Valley and it goes all the way, as you probably know, down into Africa. But that area, that very desolate desert area, George Adam Smith called it the devastation. It's a very barren place. Even when you go there today, you know, everybody's...everybody who goes to Israel now and goes there today has got water strapped from everywhere. So, you know, you don't want to go too far from the Jordan River if you're there in the time of John. And so that's kind of where he lived for 30 years.

Now we don't know what he did. We can assume, of course, he was a godly man. He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, that he walked with God, that he was a righteous man. We're very confident that Zacharias, his father, and Elizabeth told him he was the prophet who was sent to prepare the people for the Messiah, that the Messiah had been born. After all, Elizabeth and Mary were relatives, right? So John and Jesus were cousins of some level. And John knew Jesus was in

Nazareth. He knew that the 30 years that he was wandering around the desert and we don't know what he was doing, he was surviving. He may have been close enough to visit his family and have a connection. He may have been doing some preaching. We have no idea. We don't know what he did.

But he certainly knew that Jesus was living in Nazareth also waiting patiently. Jesus was working in a carpenter's shop, along with His father in Nazareth. There were...there was tremendous privacy, there was no announcement, there was no public information being disseminated about either of these. And the patience of these men as they awaited for this moment is remarkable.

But now when the ministry begins...it's amazing that it says he came into all the district around the Jordan. He stayed where he was and went everywhere around that wilderness of Judea, around the Jordan from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea...the Jordan flows pretty much straight down that whole area...and that's where he ministered, right where he was, up and down, both sides of the river. And I won't take you through some Scriptures that talk about that. John 1:28, John 3:23, John 10:40, and others position him at the river Jordan.

Now there's something important about this and that is it defies the political establishment and it defies the religious establishment. They're all in the main population centers. They're in Jerusalem predominantly and John is in the desert. And by doing that there's a certain amount of disdain shown toward that establishment. God has no regard for Gentile idolaters and God has no regard for Jewish legalistic hypocrites and apostates. This is not a part of the establishment.

And John is going to do two things. One, he's going to attack the establishment. No question, that's how he got his head chopped off. The first part of the establishment he attacks, we'll see later in the chapter, and you can take a glance down at it. Among those who come to him are some of the leaders of Israel, some of the scribes and Pharisees, and they come to him. And, I mean, does he ever attack them. He really blisters them and there's indications of that in Luke's account and more indications in the other accounts. So the first thing he attacks is the religious establishment. And he stays separate from it. It's almost parabolic. It's almost analogical. It's almost another one of those great prophetic object lessons that you see with the prophets in the Old Testament where they do things that physically act as object lessons to demonstrate some spiritual reality. John keeps his distance from the establishment in order that he may be perceived as not having anything to do with it. And from that posture attacks the establishment, first of all, the spiritual establishment, the religious establishment. Later on, you remember, he attacks Herod for his illicit marriage and his adultery and that's why he gets his head chopped off.

So he never wants to get mingled. He's apart from it. And I think there's a great message there. It's all about separation again. It's all about keeping yourselves pure from that which we must confront.

But there's a second thing. In order for somebody to come to the truth, they also have to leave that establishment. And you say, "Well, John's out there in the wilderness, the people are all in town. The only people he's ever going to see down there are people wandering from one place to another traveling, traversing. How's he going to reach the crowd?"

Back in Matthew chapter 3 and verse 5, it says, "Then Jerusalem was going out to him and all Judea and all the district around the Jordan, they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins."

You know what happened? Everybody went to John. And again you have almost an illustration of the necessary disconnect from the system that is required when someone comes to the truth. And so the Lord leaves John out in that barren, barren place, apart from the establishment because like Isaiah, like Jeremiah, like Ezekiel and some other prophets, John is going to have to keep his distance, he's going to have to be untouched, unpolluted. For 30 years he's had nothing to do with that. He's not influenced by it at all. And so his message to them is very clear and very confrontive.

His whole ministry is apart from the establishment and its kept him pure from any of those corrupting compromises that could have come. And then he calls the people to do the same, to come out from those places. And, of course, they're all pouring out there and that's when the religious leaders got to go and find out what's happening.

There's another thought here, too, as well. When the Son of God came to earth He...He didn't come to the temple. He wasn't born in the temple. He wasn't born in Herod's palace. He was born in a stable, placed in a manger. And when His forerunner comes he doesn't come to the temple either and he doesn't go to the palace of one of these tetrarchs, one of these rulers. He doesn't seek an audience of nobles. He doesn't seek an audience of kings. He doesn't seek an audience of priests. It's just like the angels who came out of heaven and when they came to announce the birth of the Savior, they went to the lowest people on the socioeconomic ladder, shepherds. And here is John out in no place, really the poorest, an anti-established man if ever there was one, the humblest of the humble. And God seems to always delight in doing that.

In 1 Corinthians 1:26 Paul said, "Consider your calling, brethren, there are not many wise according to the flesh...humanly wise...not many mighty, not many noble, but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong; the base things of the world, the despised God has chosen, the things that are not that He might nullify the things that are that no man should boast before God." God delights in choosing the humble and the lowly. And that's what you see with John. And people see John as the humblest of the humble. He's not a part of anything. He's not a part of the political system. He's not a part of the religious system. He's not even a part of the social system. And in order to come to the

truth you have to disconnect from all of that and come out, as it were, to the barren place, the wilderness place. And I think there's a wonderful picture there. God is still requiring that.

And so it is, the darkest of times in Israel. That's the temporal setting...history, geography. Next time we're going to see the eternal setting...the spiritual and the prophetical. The time was desperate, the time was depressing. Under the bondage of pagan rulers, under the leadership of apostate priests, both had stolen the lives of the people, taken their freedom, taken their joy, taken their hope. This is a wonderful time for the Messiah to come. This is the darkest of times. And it's under the pale of that darkness that the light breaks, that hope is realized and the Messiah comes to offer salvation, the forgiveness of sin and the fulfillment of promise.

Now, the sad, sad reality is that they killed John, the politicians killed John and the religionists killed Jesus. Sad story...sad story. But in the death of Jesus came the salvation of the world, right? We're going to see a lot more about that as we go through this gospel. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we know that the world today is not unlike the world in John's time, desperate, depressing, dark. The world is under the control of pagans and apostates, idolatrous rulers who do not know the true and living God and apostate religious leaders who do not know You, who have corrupt agendas, wicked, sinful agendas, who have stolen the lives of people, who by their influences have taken freedom and joy away. And t hen there is that one who rules them, as it were, the Caesar of the world, Satan, the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of the darkness of this world, the arch-enemy of God, Satan himself who has orchestrated the darkness of the human experience. And as it was a wonderful dawning when the Messiah came in that day when John lived, it is also wonderful to say the Messiah still comes and He comes every day to the heart of one who seeks Him. We thank You that when we prepare a path for the King, He'll come on that path into our hearts. We thank You that Christ is still coming into the heart of one who repents and embraces Him as Savior and Lord. And may that occur even now among some right here hearing this message and may it occur again and again through this Christmas season. May the world awaken to the Christ who came to save them from their sins, from death and hell and to give them heaven and eternal joy and fulfillment.

Father, we pray that You would work in every heart to give us the knowledge of the Son of God and an increasing love for Him in gratitude for His mighty work on our behalf. We pray in His name. Amen.

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