

Luke 3

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the significance of John the Baptist's ministry, the rejection of Israel, and the baptism of Jesus, highlighting the importance of repentance and the coming of the kingdom of God.

Scripture: Luke 3:3

Topics: "Repentance", "The Role of Jesus"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Luke 3, emphasizing the transition from the Jewish law to the new relationships established through Jesus Christ. He highlights John the Baptist's role as a prophet calling for repentance and preparing the way for the Lord, contrasting the moral state of Israel with God's enduring word. Darby notes that while Israel faced judgment for their unbelief, God's purpose extends beyond them to all humanity, as seen in the baptism of Jesus, which signifies a new beginning. He underscores the importance of true repentance and righteousness, warning that mere heritage will not suffice in the face of God's coming judgment. Ultimately, Darby presents Jesus as the perfect man, fully dependent on God, and the fulfillment of God's promises to humanity.

Transcript

The two preceding chapters have given the general character; they have shewn the going out of the thoughts of God to man. Accordingly we find that the Gospel, as a whole, is particularly occupied with what is not Jewish. Still the Jewish part is given at first with considerable detail, inasmuch as Israel, because of their unbelief and moral worthlessness, are to be set aside, in order to make way for new relationships, founded on what God reveals Himself to be for man in Jesus, the true and only mediator. But if chapter 1 disclosed the faithfulness of God to the Abrahamic promises, to His covenant and His oath, chapter 2 puts us in the presence of the actual government of the world and of the Lord's land and people under the fourth beast, the Roman empire. What confusion does not sin create? The Jews are subject to the Gentiles; Joseph and Mary, of David's royal house, go up to be taxed. Nevertheless the ways of God shine so much the brighter for the darkness that surrounded them: He was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. Israel, however, would be put to a new moral test by His presentation of Himself. Alas! it would soon appear that, if they had not kept the law, they hated grace. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel: and for a sign which shall be spoken against."

46 In chapter 3 we have the ministry of God coming in by a prophet as of old by Samuel. "The word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness." It is not without object that the Spirit mentions

the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, etc. All the earth was seemingly at rest under its heathen lord; the word of God found its suited sphere in the wilderness. The law and the prophets were until John: and where should he be in such a state of things but the wilderness? Could he morally own it? God will not have His messenger in Jerusalem.

Prophecy is the sovereign means whereby God can communicate with His people when they are ruined and departed from Him. John understands this, and preaches the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And such was the place assigned him, many centuries before, by Esaias the prophet. It was vain for Israel to plead their privileges and rights. All was wrong, and the Judge was at the door. John's work was not to lead the people back to the law: he was preparing the way of the Lord. Herein he differed from the prophets as well as the law, or rather he went farther; for God's time was come for a step in advance. The prophets led back to Horeb: John says not a word of this, though his father was a priest, and himself, of course, an Aaronite. He does not try to set up again what was closed; he announces the kingdom. He may not introduce the church, nor even the glad tidings of God's grace (both awaited the accomplishment of the work of redemption), but he drops the law, and shews that God's purpose is the kingdom.

47 The quotation from Esaias sets aside Israel - not the Gentiles merely but Israel - as grass, withered grass, without a green blade left. Yet the word of the Lord endureth for ever, and this when all hope for man was gone. Israel may have failed, but the word of the Lord shall stand. Moreover, since it was the Lord who was coming, every valley should be filled, etc. Not the Jews alone, but all flesh, should see God's deliverance. If sin plunges all in indiscriminate ruin and a common judgment, God can meet man thus ruined, but His glory will not be shut up in the narrow limits of Israel.

Verses 7-14. But, to be blessed, man must repent. God would have realities, and not a mere nominal people; He must have fruits answering to hearts which felt and judged their moral condition, and which therefore turned from themselves to God. Ordinances, formal claims, etc., which should have been means of blessing, would be no shelter against the coming wrath; nor would God permit them to hinder His creating true children of the promise, if this generation were but Ishmael over again. Judgment must begin at the house of God.

In fact, as we know, John was beheaded, and the Lord was crucified, and the kingdom, presented in Him, and by Him, was rejected by Israel. By-and-by it will be set up visibly and in power.* Meanwhile the church is set up, because the kingdom is not set up in this manifested way. And those who now take their place with the Lord share His rejection. They are members of His body, the church. They shall share His glory, but it will be heavenly, and not earthly, glory. In another sense we are in the kingdom now. To faith heaven rules now, and we own it, and know it; but Satan is actually prince and god of this world; and hence those who are made kings to God (for that is our true place) are called to suffer. Therefore Paul went everywhere preaching the kingdom of God, as well as Christ and the church. We have that by virtue of which we shall reign with Christ; but even that is not our best portion. To be one with Christ - His body and bride - is far more blessed. If your mind only rests on the person of Christ, there is no difficulty in seeing that when He is cut off, all must cease as regards the earth. He is the centre of all; and when rejected, what prophecy spoke of, and what seemed about to be accomplished, breaks off. Thereupon Christ ascends, and takes up a glory above the heavens, and there now the saints find their place with Him. Compare Psalms 2 and 8.

{*Observe, that Matthew only uses the expression, "kingdom of heaven." It is often, in a general sense, capable of being interchanged with "kingdom of God," as we see by comparing Luke. Notwithstanding, the

two phrases cannot always replace each other, and Matthew uses "kingdom of God" in a few passages where "kingdom of heaven" could not be used (Matt. 6:33; 12:28; 21:43). Thus "the kingdom of God" was there when Christ the King was there; "the kingdom of heaven" began with Christ going to heaven. By-and-by, when Satan ceases to rule, it will be the "kingdom of heaven" (and "of God" too, of course), not in a mystery, but in manifestation. "The kingdom of God" has also a moral force which "kingdom of heaven" has not; and in this way it is frequently used by Paul, and was peculiarly suitable to the Spirit's design in Luke.}

48 John Baptist, then, addresses himself to the Jews, demanding repentance, and righteousness as its fruit; shews them that, if they were nearer to God outwardly as Jews, they must expect judgment the sooner. If the Lord was coming, He must have what became the Lord. The axe was even then lying at the root of the trees; if there was not good fruit on the trees, every one must be hewn down and burnt. Repentance or wrath - which? The Lord would allow no plea of descent from Abraham, if their ways belied Abraham; He must have righteousness. It is the Lord that is just at hand, and He must have a people fit for Him, or He would out of the very stones make a suited people for Himself.

Evidently John's word is not a voice of mercy to the poor sinner. God is presented in the way of judgment, not of sovereign mercy. He does not say, "Come unto me." John could not say it, because he was not Christ, and none but He could say, "Come unto me." John came in righteousness.

In verses 10-14 moral testimony is given, and that in detail. John deals with the practical iniquity of each set of people. So even when the question of the Christ is raised (v. 15-18), "one mightier than I cometh," says he. It is of His power specially he thinks - His power morally as outwardly. "He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire." It is the power of the Holy Ghost and His consuming judgment. He could not speak of the grace of the gospel which we know now. He proclaims One who was coming after him, not a present salvation. Whatever would not stand the fire was to be burnt up. For His 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." (Compare Isa. 21:10, etc.) God's floor was Israel; there He was getting His wheat, if any were to be found. But His fan is in His hand; He is going to make short work. Titus finally set aside God's floor upon the earth; Israel's sin had lost it morally when they rejected Christ, but at the destruction of Jerusalem it was done with thoroughly for the present.

49 Verses 19, etc. - Luke's method of instruction is to be noticed in passing. He shews that John had preached and exhorted moral truth, and then disposes of him, putting him, as it were, out of the scene, in order to bring Christ in. It was not that historically John was imprisoned at that juncture by Herod the tetrarch; it took place long after. But it is a sample of Luke's manner, who returns to the Lord's taking His place amongst the remnant of Israel. For the Lord does not identify Himself with the nation; but, directly there is a poor remnant, He identifies Himself with it.

This history opens with verse 21, and how wonderful and full of grace! "Now when all the people were baptized, it came to pass, that Jesus also being baptized, and praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Ghost descended, in a bodily shape like a dove, upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased." One may have looked and listened mournfully, as one reads of John Baptist and his testimony. We might have asked, as the dying record of men passed before us, What is man? But now my eye rests on Jesus: I find the Lord from heaven a man. All is to begin again. Do I ask again, What is man? At once Christ comes out. Do I look at myself? at all around? What do I see? Enough to break my heart, if there is a heart to be broken. The only thing which prevents people

being utterly broken down is that they have not a heart to feel things as they are.

But a rest is here! I have got a man now who satisfied God - this blessed man on earth in the presence of God, looking to God, and an object to God! not Messiah purging His floor, but Him in whom God's thoughts and purposes are all folded up - not man perishing before the moth, but Jesus the Son of man, not merely coming down from Abraham and David, but traced up, "which was the son of Adam, which was the son of God" - the second Man, the last Adam, the quickening Spirit. What a relief; for what is man? What one's self when the heart's sin is known - giving up God for an apple from the beginning hitherto! But now a man, a blessed man, appears, "and praying." We are not told this elsewhere, and why here? Because Luke presents man in his perfection - the dependent man; for dependence is the essence of a perfect man. Truly we see God shining all through, but yet in Jesus the dependent man, in the place and condition of perfectness as man. The root of sin in us is self-will, independence. Here my heart has rest! A dependent man in the midst of sorrow, but perfectly with God in all. See Luke's account of the transfiguration also: in humiliation or in glory, it makes no difference as to this; the perfect is ever the dependent one.

50 And when that blessed heart thus expressed its dependence, did He get no answer? "The heaven was opened." Does heaven open thus on me? It is open to me indeed, no doubt, but I pray because it is open; it opened because He prayed. I come and look up because the heavens were opened on Him.

It is, indeed, a lovely picture of grace, and we may be bold to say that the Father loved to look on - to look down, in the midst of all sin, on His beloved Son. Nothing but what was divine could thus awaken God's heart; and yet it was the lowly perfect man. He takes not the place of His eternal glory, as the Creator, the Son of God. He stoops and is baptized (Psalm 16). He says, "in thee do I trust." He says to Jehovah, "Thou art the Lord: my goodness extendeth not to thee." He says to the godly remnant in Israel, "To the saints that are on the earth, and to the excellent . . . In them is all my delight." He needed no repentance, yet is He baptized with them; just as when, later on, He puts forth His sheep, He goes before them. He identifies Himself in grace with Israel, even with such as were of a clean heart. And the Holy Ghost descends like a dove on Him - fit emblem of that spotless man! - fit resting place for the Spirit in the deluge of this world! And how sweet, too, that Jesus is pointed out to us as God's object. I know the way the Father feels about Him. I am made His intimate, and admitted to hear Him expressing His affection for His Son, to see the links reformed between God and man. Heaven is opened, not on something above, but upon a man on the earth. Thus I get rest, and my heart finds communion with God in His beloved Son. It is only the believer who enjoys it, but the link is there. And if I have that in and about me which distresses the soul, I have that in Him which is unfailing joy and comfort.

51 The genealogy quite falls in with the thought that God is shewing grace in man and to man. Jesus, the beloved Son of God, is traced up to Adam and to God. Jesus is Son of man; He is heir in this sense. He takes up the inheritance God gave to man. O what a truth! Where could one's heart turn for rest, if it had not Jesus to rest in? With Him, let heaven and earth be turned upside down, and still I have a rest. What blessedness for the heart to have the object God Himself is occupied with! May our hearts also be more and more occupied with Him!

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