The Axe is Laid to the Root (Luke 3:1-9)
Sunday school July 10, 2016

I want to call your attention this morning to Luke chapter 3. The next block of text talks about John the Baptist’s ministry and Jesus’ baptism. It starts in verse 1 and goes all the way down to verse 22. We won’t get that far today, so let’s READ Luke 3:1-9. When we go from chapter 2 to chapter 3 we cross the first major seam in Luke’s gospel. The first two chapters describe John’s and Jesus’ entrance into this world and, at the end of chapter 2, Jesus’ growth and development. Jesus does not appear in this chapter until verse 21, and at this point He is a fully grown man. We’ll do some math and figure out roughly how old He was in a few minutes.

So in chapters 1 and 2 we have the backgrounds of these two great men of God, John and Jesus. In chapter 3, they come together. So chapter 3 is kind of the Pittsburgh of Luke’s Gospel. Pittsburgh is where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers come together to form the Ohio. Jesus is the Allegheny and Ohio; John is the Monongahela (the Allegheny is bigger than the Monongahela). The first few verses here bring John on the scene and summarize the message he brought. That’s what we’re going to study today.

Transition: So let me HAND OUT OUTLINES. First, we have...

I. Historical Background READ v. 1-2 This chapter starts with another date/time stamp that is not all that different from the ones we studied back in chapters 1 and 2. I don’t want to bore you, but this date/time stamp will lead to another short history lesson. The main identifier is that first phrase, “the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.” As I mentioned back in chapter 2 with Caesar Augustus; Augustus was his name. The same holds here. The title Caesar means he was over the entire Roman empire, so Caesar was his title; Tiberius was his name. Tiberius became Caesar in September of 14 A.D. He had a coregency with his predecessor Augustus before that, so there is some disagreement as to whether that is the correct year for this calculation, but 14 A.D. is reasonable and is the most commonly used year. So if this is the 15th year of his reign, again doing some math, these events took place in 29 or 30 A.D. So to keep things in an historical timeline perspective, Jesus was born in 4 or 5 B.C. The event at the temple we studied last week happened in 8 or 9 A.D. Jesus’ baptism happens in 29 or 30 A.D. So Jesus is in His early to mid 30’s at this point.
Tiberius had a military background. I mentioned back in chapter 1 that this time in history is known as the *pax romana*, or Roman peace. The way the Roman Empire obtained this peace was by defeating all their enemies, all other powers that posed a significant threat to them. The military general that led the Roman armies for most of this defeating was this guy, Tiberius. He was a pretty great general; he was a pretty bad Caesar. There was a lot of treason and insurrection during his reign. Supposedly he was mentally ill during the last few years of his reign. More relevant to our study, he was very hostile to the Jews. When we studied the taxing/registration Mary and Joseph had to partake in under Caesar Augustus in chapter 2, I mentioned that this kind of registration was normally for taxation and conscription, but for the Jews it was only for taxation because they were exempt from Roman military service. Tiberias changed that. In 19 A.D., so about 10 years before this baptism event took place, Tiberias forced Jews who were of military age to join the Roman army. He also deported all Jews from the city of Rome on punishment of enslavement. So the Jews did not like Tiberias, and by this point there was a lot of ill-will between the Jews and their Roman rulers. That’s the main thing you need to know for this text and really for the rest of the gospel.

The other people mentioned in verse 1 are lower-level, more local Roman rulers mostly from Galilee and points north. They would have been known to the original recipients of Luke’s gospel, but they don’t help us date the events today. The names of the high priests mentioned in verse 2, on the other hand, do have significance. If you know a little about the Jewish law, you know that there is only one high priest at a given time. So what’s the deal with listing two of them? Annas was the high priest until 15 A.D., about 15 years before the events of Luke 3, at which time he was deposed by the Romans. The main thing you have to understand about the Romans is that all they ever cared about was money and power. As an aside, that’s not all that different from some people who are seeking high office today. They didn’t care about Jewish ceremonies. They didn’t care about religion. They didn’t care about justice. When Pilate signed the order to crucify Jesus, he didn’t do it out of any sense of justice. He did it because it would appease the masses and keep him in power. The Romans wanted somebody in the office of high priest they could control, so they deposed Annas, and over the next few years the Romans appointed 5 of Annas’ sons and 1 of his son-in-laws to the office of high priest. Caiaphas, the other “priest” mentioned in verse 2, was actually Annas’ son-in-law. The Jews didn’t like that: they thought the high priest should be chosen by God, not by the Romans. So even though Annas had not done the duties of high priest for about 15 years at this point, the Jews still viewed him as high priest because, in their eyes, he had been wrongfully deposed. So of the two high priests mentioned here, Annas was the high priest according to the Jews, while Caiaphas was the high priest according to the Romans. Because the Romans were in charge, Caiaphas was the one who actually executed the office of high priest at this time. So again in verse 2 you see the tension between the Jews and the Romans.
Transition: So the Romans were unfavorably treating if not oppressing the Jews. Into that context comes...

II. John’s Ministry The first thing I want you to notice is the source of John’s message, and that’s...

IIA. Word of God READ v. 2 The source of John’s message is not Jewish tradition (like Annas). It’s not the Roman government (like Tiberius and Caiaphas). His message comes from God. Just like the word of God came to the prophets of the Old Testament (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), the word of God now comes to John. In Luke chapter 20, Jesus uses this fact when talking with the Jewish elders. They ask Him, “by what authority do you do these things?” He asks them, “The baptism of John, was it from heaven, or of men?” The Jewish elders realize that, logically speaking, they are in a bind: whichever answer they give, He has shown their denial of Him to be false. At least they were smart enough to realize that; many people especially today would not be. But Jesus’ question was not a trick question. The answer is right here in verse 2: it was from God. Last Sunday evening I think it was Pastor preached on the people and things who bare witness to Jesus as listed in John chapter 5. One of them was John the Baptist (John 5:33-35). His witness of Jesus came from God, and therefore it was true. The word of God came to John.

Transition: The next aspect of John’s ministry is...

IIB. Baptism of Repentance READ v. 3 I need to spend some time on this because water baptism is used in several different ways throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, water was used for ceremonial cleansing. Leviticus chapters 14 and 15 describe some of those uses. The word “baptism” doesn’t appear in the Old Testament because it wasn’t baptism. The Greek word for baptism means to dip, and they used water for sprinkling and washing back then. That’s why we believe in baptism by immersion because the word for baptism means to dip. So in the Old Testament, water “baptism” is used for a ceremonial cleansing.

In the church age, baptism is a few things. For one, it publicly identifies us and the salvation we have with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. Romans chapter 6 talks about that. It’s also a figure. The reference I gave you is I Peter 3:21, which says, “The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” People who want to convince you that water baptism is necessary for salvation like to just read the first part: “baptism saves us, there you go.” If you keep reading, Peter clarifies what he is talking about: it saves us from a bad relationship with God, not from the penalty of sin.
The baptism of repentance here is a transition between the law and the church age. It’s not a ceremonial cleansing like in the Old Testament. It’s not a figure like today: Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection hadn’t happened yet. It’s also not the case that people were saved the moment John baptized them. Some people read that last phrase in verse 3 “for the remission of sins” and think that undergoing John’s baptism was a work that saved a person. I had a friend at a church I worked out of in Indiana during my undergraduate college days. He was a solid Christian, but he had some odd ideas. He would say, “in the church age we are saved by faith alone, but under the law people were saved by faith plus works.” That came from Scofield’s doctrine of dispensations, for those of you who know a little about that sort of thing. Salvation has never been by works. It has always been by faith. The difference between the Old Testament and now is we have a much clearer picture of what we are to have faith in. The work of water baptism has never saved anybody, not in the church age, not under the law, not John’s baptism, never.

I’ve told you what John’s baptism is not, so now what is it? Don’t out-think things. It’s called the baptism of repentance, so someone undergoing this baptism publicly identifies himself as someone who has repented, who has changed their mind about sin and turned to God. The repentance leads to remission of sin, not the baptism, hence the phrase “baptism of repentance for remission of sin.” John would not baptize people who had not repented. In Matthew 3:7, Matthew’s account of this event, when the Pharisees and Sadducees come to be baptized, he refuses to baptize them and calls them a generation of vipers. So just as one role of baptism in the church is to publicly identify us with Christ, this baptism identified one with repentance. That raises the question as to why Jesus was baptized. He had no sins of His own to repent of. With that tease, we’ll deal with that when we get to Jesus’ baptism, hopefully next week.

Transition: Next, John’s ministry was...

IIC. Foretold by Isaiah READ v. 4-6 These verses are a quote, or at least a close paraphrase, of Isaiah 40:3-5. If you know a little about Isaiah 40, you know that it is an oracle about the comfort that is to come for God’s people. It starts with “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people saith your God,” and it ends with “they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.” The part of Isaiah 40 quoted in these verses is one of preparation. In this era, when a king went to travel to a far country, he would have a team of people go before him and improve the road he was going to travel on, make it smoother and wider. When we talked about John’s preparing ministry back in chapter 1, I commented that repentance, which would be John’s main message, serves to get people ready for the comfort and Messiah (Jesus) who is to come. So several hundred years ago Isaiah said “the comfort’s coming.” About 30 years ago the angel said to John’s father Zacharias, “the comfort’s coming.” Now, here is the person whom God has sent to prepare the way for the comfort. It’s imminent, it’s almost here. To the rank-and-file Jews who were being oppressed by the Romans, as opposed to the elitists like Caiaphas who were selected by the Romans, John’s message would have been a very welcome message. Repentance has a bad rap in our society, but when you think about it in terms of preparing for God’s comfort, it’s not so bad.
Now the last verse, verse 6, says “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” That doesn’t mean everybody will be saved. It means everybody has the ability to be saved. There will never be anybody be able to stand before God and say “my sin didn’t get paid.” Jesus’ death paid for all sin, but you have to accept the payment.

Transition: The last item for today: not only is there comfort, but there is...

IID. Warning of Imminent Judgment READ v. 7-9 Verses 7 and 8 are John’s call to repentence to escape the wrath and obtain the comfort that is to come. Jesus in His later ministry would address some of these issues. In Matthew 23:33, Jesus calls the Jewish leaders a generation of vipers. In John 8:31-47 Jesus address Jews who are doing exactly what John warns against in verse 8: relying on their heritage. John’s point is you personally need to get right with God. It doesn’t matter what your parents did. You need to repent. You need to get right. In verse 9, he drives home the urgency for action. That phrase “the axe is laid unto the root of the trees” is an odd one. A few years ago I had a tree cutter come out and remove a pair of trees that were growing up against my house. They cut it down close to the ground but left the stump because I didn’t want to pay them extra to grind the stump. So now every time I walk past that area I see the stump sitting there, and I usually think, “couldn’t they have cut it a little lower?” No matter how low they cut it, the answer would be yes until you get down to the root, the very bottom of the tree. Then the ax or any tree cutting tool can’t cut any more because there is nothing left to cut. To extend this analogy a little beyond what is specifically written here, in Isaiah’s time the ax was laid to the branches, above the ground. To Zacharias, John’s father, the ax was laid to the trunk, near the bottom. Now that John is here, it’s laid to the root. No other events stand in the way. God’s comfort for His people and judgment are imminent. You have to act now.

Conclusion

As a closing thought and application, as I look at events today, my opinion is the ax is laid to the root. Jesus’ return, our rapture and the world’s judgment, are imminent. Israel basically has no allies now. Was the United States was their last ally, and sadly we aren’t much of an ally any more. Most of God’s people are luke-warm. They claim His name, but they aren’t following Him with their minds or their actions. We’re getting close to one-world government. When you get the right person on the scene, it won’t take long to form. For God’s people, this means that the time for action, the time for repentence, the time for living for Him, is now. The ax is laid to the root.