

## *The Last Prophet-Part 1*

### *Luke 3:1-14*

Rugged mountains rose up from green, tropical trench where the Jordan flowed down to the Dead Sea. Lion yellow and lion fierce, those mountains marked the edge of the moonscape of the Judean desert.

It was a wilderness of rocks and ravines, streaked and stained with alkali. A searing sun scorched the stones by day. And like slivers of ice, stars glistened through frozen nights.

It was an inhospitable place to live. But here and there, little black goats somehow squeezed out a living by cropping the dry, wiry grass that struggled through the stones.

But those goats were not alone in the Judean desert. A man lived there, too.

An angel told his priest father to name him John. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets and the herald Isaiah promised to send before the coming of the Messiah.

*...as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every ravine will be filled and every mountain and hill will be brought low; the crooked will become straight, and the rough roads smooth; and all flesh will see the salvation of God.'" Verses 4-6*

Perhaps it happened beneath a shower of desert stars when jackals were yipping from a distant hill deep in the darkness. But sometime there in the wilderness, the great and glorious God of Heaven spoke to John.

*...the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. Verse 2*

We must never forget that. The message John shouted out beside the reeds and rushes of the Jordan came from God Himself. So we cannot simply dismiss what the desert prophet said.

We must learn it and live it.

## *The Ruling*

God's Word did not come to John over time, piece by piece and bit by bit. Luke ties the time down to the reign of Rome's imperial regent, Tiberius. And as if that was not enough, he added four regional rulers and two high priests.

John responded to the message and the mission God gave him by walking down off the barren mountains to the tall palms that shaded the shores of the Jordan.

*And he came into all the district around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; Verse 3*

Almost immediately, crowds began to gather. And for good reason. The desert prophet looked forever like a reincarnation of Elijah. And his sermons were every bit as striking and stirring.

His message was not at all one of love and compassion. Hearing him preach was as shocking as gripping a bare wire.

Jesus called to the lost and the lonely, to the weary and the worn. But not John.

*So he began saying to the crowds who were going out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Verse 7*

Throughout the Scriptures, a serpent is a symbol for Satan. John's heavenly Revelation leaves no doubt about that.

*...the serpent of old who is called the devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; Revelation 12:9*

That makes the way John addressed the multitudes even more hard and harsh. The desert prophet said people living then and now are the spawn of Satan.

But we must not be surprised by that. Jesus said the same thing. He insisted that our problem is not what we do but what we are.

*You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. John 8:44*

We are all born as Satan's slaves. We seek what he seeks and desire what he desires.

*You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. Matthew 12:34-35*

We cannot set a watch over our words any more than we can reform our works. We both speak and seek sin because we are sinful.

So we must not be startled and surprised to read that John said there is a terrible wrath coming upon us. After all, Jesus said the same thing.

*You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Matthew 23:33*

That is the problem both we and the people who walked the dusty road down to Jericho from Jerusalem face. How can we escape?

## *The Remedy*

John stood beside the green waters of the Jordan and preached to people like us: people who were sentenced to an excruciating, eternal death. But his message was not without hope.

He not only diagnosed the disease. He also recommended a remedy which can transform God from our Judge to our Father and our faithful Friend.

Yes, John extended the Lord's offer of forgiveness. But forgiveness demands a blood sacrifice. That is why God sent His Son to this world. Later, John would put his finger squarely upon it. Jesus was the Lamb of God, slain as the pure and perfect, the full and final sacrifice for our sins.

In a way, John was allowed to draw from the bottomless well of God's grace years before Christ would purchase it by carrying His cross out of Jerusalem's city gate to suffer and die.

Yes, salvation is a free gift. But to access God's grace we must do what John said God demanded. We must repent.

That means we must change our minds. We must shun what we once sought and loathe what we once loved. And we must seek what we once shunned and love what we once loathed.

True, we are powerless to transform our sinful hearts. We are born with the attitudes, aims and affections of the prince of darkness. But we must want to change. If we do that, God will change our hearts and give us a heart like His own.

*I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. Ezekiel 36:26-27*

John also demanded something else of those who came to him for forgiveness. He also insisted that they waded out into the river with him and be baptized.

That word really means immersed. John lowered penitents down into the river until they were completely submerged in water. Then and now, that is an object lesson more than anything else.

*...do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Romans 6:3-7*

The lesson in baptism is clear. When we are baptized, we are acting out a prayer to God. We are telling our loving Lord we want to be crucified with Christ– to die to everything we once were, to all we have sought and savored.

And just as Jesus rose up from the dead, we want to live a new live as God's adopted children. That is what we are telling God when we are lifted up out of the water.

Jesus once said that publicans and prostitutes came to listen to John preach. But they were not the only ones who walked all the way from Jerusalem to hear the desert prophet.

Proud and pompous priests also came. The rich and the powerful stood with them. Some of those men were Sadducees who had reduced the faith of Abraham and Moses to empty cultural traditions.

Others were Pharisees who believed God's Law was to be obeyed down to the tiniest detail. But both groups based their righteousness upon the same spiritual foundation.

They believed their eternal destiny was solid and sure because they could trace their ancestors back to Abraham, the father of their faith. But John said that was not a firm foundation for faith at all.

*...do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. Indeed the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; Verses 8-9*

If those Jews were to come to God, if they were to be forgiven and avoid God's righteous condemnation, they could not rely upon anything other than God's goodness and grace. In fact, one of the works God gave John was to hack away at anything and everything men might rely upon for righteousness.

That was true for them. And it is also true for us. We cannot rely upon any relationship to a righteous relative, any more than they could. It makes no difference if our parents or grandparents were faithful Christians. Salvation cannot be inherited or passed down from generation to generation.

We cannot rely upon any rite or ritual, either. Baptism is a glorious testimony of saving faith. But we cannot stake our spiritual hope upon water baptism alone. Neither can we rely upon sharing in the Lord's Supper or church membership.

We must cut ourselves off from anything but Jesus Christ. We cannot depend upon our morality or good works. We must rely absolutely and utterly upon the grace our Savior purchased for us with His blood.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. Ephesians 2:8-9*

John was sent not only to call men and women to be forgiven. He was also sent as a gardener, to lay an axe against everything we might rely upon to be right with God.

One thing has not and cannot change. We are saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. And nothing needs to be added to it. In fact, nothing can be added to it.

Or salvation is out of reach.

## *The Results*

Salvation does not come by works. Even repentance is not a righteous act which saves. However, if our repentance is real, it will produce works. John was definite about that.

*Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, Verse 8*

Both John and Jesus said that if anyone's repentance is real, it will produce practical results in that person's life. If it does not, the change of mind that person professed was merely pretense.

And pretended repentance is powerless to save anyone from God's righteous wrath. So if there are no changes in behavior, there is no change of thinking. And the sentence stands.

*...so every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Verse 9*

Jesus said the same thing. Salvation must produce practical fruits in our lives, or we are still doomed to suffer the fire of God's wrath.

*A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Matthew 7:18-19*

When the people who crowded around John heard that message, a question loomed large in their minds.

*And the crowds were questioning him, saying, "Then what shall we do?" Verse 10*

That is the question. What kinds of changes should genuine repentance and sincere salvation cause? What kinds of things should we want to do if we really do belong to Jesus Christ?

There is not the slightest hint that the proud and the pompous; priests, Pharisees and Sadducees ever bothered to ask that question. And their silence forever condemns them.

However, if we really do belong to the Lord we will want to be like Him. So since our God's very nature is love and since He is full of lovingkindness and compassion, we should be, too.

But godly love is much more than emotion. It must be both powerful and practical.

*...whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? 1 John 3:17*

John put it in very practical terms. If we really have repented of our sinful ways, we will want to share what we have with people in need.

*And he would answer and say to them, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." Verse 11*

In every province of their far flung empire, Rome was primarily concerned with two things: peace and taxes. But they did not actually collect the taxes they levied.

Instead, they jobbed out tax collection. Businessmen would pay a handsome fee to buy a contract to collect road tolls, harbor fees or taxes in a region. They were called publicans because they collected funds for the public treasury.

Those hired tax collectors were let loose as free agents. As such, they were to collect the taxes Rome levied and a bit more as personal profit.

But many publicans saw their purchased position as a personal gold mine. Instead of collecting just enough extra for a small profit, they squeezed people for all the money they could get.

Some of those crooked tax collectors stood in the crowd when John preached. And as they listened, they were drawn to God.

*And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" Verse 12*

The publicans wanted to know what kinds of changes they should expect repentance to make in their lives. And once again, John had an answer.

*And he said to them, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." Verse 13*

That boils down to a commitment to personal morality and integrity. Our Lord is a righteous, holy God. And if we really have been transformed into His image, we are too.

That personal integrity should change the way we behave at work. And it should transform how we buy and sell. We cannot claim to belong to Christ yet be crooked and unscrupulous in our personal dealings.

The principle John gave to publicans also applies to us. Those who belong to Jesus ought to exhibit His righteousness in all they do.

No one liked paying Roman taxes, especially the Jews. But tax collectors were not without resources and reinforcements.

Rome dispatched armed soldiers to persuade people to pay the taxes the publicans came to collect. And some of those soldiers were also touched by the message John preached.

*Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, "And what about us, what shall we do?"*

*And he said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." Verse 14*

Those soldiers made a denarius a day. Across the Roman empire, that was looked upon as a sort of minimum wage.

But many soldiers were not content to live on their meager pay. So they supplemented their income with graft.

The graft was extortion. They would threaten to turn people in as tax dodgers. Of course, for a small bribe they would willingly keep quiet.

If people refused to pay the bribe, the soldiers would threaten them with ruin or violence at the end of a sword.

John said the root of the problem was that the soldiers were not content with the wages they earned. They were greedy. But if they genuinely repented, all of that would necessarily end. Jesus said it best.

*No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. Matthew 6:24 (ESV)*

If we call ourselves Christians, we cannot and must not have a craving for riches. We who serve the Savior, are to trust Him to meet our needs. And we are to be both full of praise and completely content with what He chooses to provide.

*Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; Hebrews 13:5*

Saints should be always satisfied. After all, what we have is Jesus. And who could want more than Him?

