

The World that Missed the Messiah

Luke 3:1-3

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Summary: As Stephen explores the beginning of Jesus' adult ministry, he starts by introducing the political and religious scene that sets the stage for Jesus' arrival. Despite the hostile political climate and the corrupt religious scene, God knows the time is perfect for a true religious revival. Join Stephen today and discover that no matter the earthly circumstances, and regardless of who has earthly power, our Great Commission never changes.

In the late 1400's, a Dominican friar by the name of Savonarola would raise a solitary voice in Italy to confront the church with its corruption and call both church leaders and congregations to genuine spiritual renewal.

For the most part, he was rejected, ignored, vilified and persecuted. But he persisted in preaching the gospel of repentance and faith in Christ.

In his day, the offices of the church, from pope to bishop, were often sold the highest bidder. Immorality was commonplace among clergy and openly flaunted in the church and the community at large.

Savonarola spoke out against sin, pleading for a return to God and His Word.

Eventually, church leaders ordered his arrest, and while involved in his morning prayers, he was arrested and imprisoned.

After languishing in prison, when Savonarola finally came to trial, the pope sent a message through his commissioner which read, "Put Savonarola to death, even if he is another John the Baptist."

On May 23, 1498 they hanged him, set his body on fire and threw his ashes into the river.

Adapted from Philip Schaff, quoted in Charles R. Swindoll, Exalting Christ the Son of God, p. 16

Today, he is considered one of the forerunners of the Reformation. During the next century, Martin Luther would preach against the corruption and darkness of religious leaders and traditions and call for a return to the gospel of faith alone in Christ alone.

The foundation for living — and for the preaching — of the reformers like Savonarola and Luther and others was that little phrase which read, in Latin — sola scriptura — the Scriptures alone.

In the light of history, I don't think Savonarola would have minded at all being compared to John the Baptist.

In a similar context, John the Baptist would step out onto the stage of an incredibly complex, divisive and explosive political and religious scene.

Adapted from Bock, p. 282

John will begin preaching and will introduce what we could call the ultimate Reformation — the introduction of the Redeemer.



When we think about the Reformation, we often think about Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. But what about Jesus? In what ways were Jesus, and John the Baptist before him, reforming the religious culture of their time?

Now take your Bibles to the Gospel of Luke where Luke now changes the scenery here in chapter 3. Instead of rushing into the sermon notes of John's message, Luke gives us the names of five Gentiles and two Jewish leaders — essentially giving us a picture of what the world was like when John began his ministry.

And let me tell you — the world has not changed at all. And the greater tragedy here is that all of these men — and the world at large — will effectively miss the Messiah. They will completely ignore Him.

There's so much here in this political and religious setting that can encourage and instruct us today, so let's take the time and do a little digging.

First, Luke reveals the political scenery by giving us the names of five men who were considered the power brokers of this first century world.

Luke introduces them in **verse 1**:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.

Luke 3:1

Let's start at the bottom of this political food chain and work our way up to the top.

Lysanias is mentioned last in the list, called here a tetrarch, which literally means governor of a fourth part — a small part of the kingdom. His biography has become blurred over time, without any clear record of his accomplishments as a leader.

The next two tetrarchs are sons of Herod the Great. You may remember that Herod the Great was the one who ordered the death of all the little boys in the region of Bethlehem, hoping to kill the baby boy identified by the wise men as the King of the Jews.

Well, when Herod the Great died, and realized too late that he wasn't that great after all, Caesar Augustus divided Herod's little kingdom into sections and some of them were ruled over by Herod's three sons.

One of his sons isn't mentioned here by Luke, more than likely because he was soon fired from his job and exiled by the Emperor for his cruelty to his subjects. Nothing more was heard of him after his banishment.

Another son of Herod the Great, mentioned here by Luke as Philip, ruled for nearly 30 years. He had a taste for beautiful palaces and entertainment. He built the town of Caesarea Philippi, naming it in honor of himself, of course.

William Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#) (Westminster, 1975), p. 31

Another son mentioned here by Luke is simply referred to as Herod. His fuller title is Herod Antipas, and he was a wicked man who ruled over Galilee. This will be the Herod before whom Jesus will stand trial.

One more thing to set the stage here regarding Herod — about the time John the Baptist is beginning his ministry, this Herod visits his brother Phillip.

At the time, Herod is married to the daughter of an Arabian king, but while visiting Phillip, Herod begins an affair with Phillip's wife and eventually banishes his wife and marries Phillip's wife.

Adapted from Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 91

John the Baptist will publicly condemn Herod as an adulterer, which will land John in jail for two years, before Herod's new wife finally gets her revenge by having John the Baptist executed.

And if all this sounds like a twisted soap opera, it only gets worse.

Next, Luke mentions Pontius Pilate, a much more familiar political leader. Pontius Pilate became the Governor of Judea around the time Jesus was in his early 20s.

He will be in charge of the trial of Jesus and while he realizes Jesus hasn't committed any crime, he doesn't want to lose any popularity with the people, so he brings out a basin of water and washes his hands, symbolically washing his hands of the entire matter, and then hands Jesus over to be crucified (Matthew 27).

Finally, and listed first in the food chain of political power, is the Roman Emperor, Tiberius.

Tiberius had been placed into power by Caesar Augustus.

Tiberius had led a successful career as an army commander in campaigns that conquered modern day Croatia, Serbia, Hungary and parts of Germany. When he

assumed the throne, he was already 56 years old and he wasted no time in demanding an oath of allegiance from the Senate, the soldiers and finally, the public as a whole.

Adapted from Michael Grant, *The Twelve Caesars* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 86-90

Suspicion seemed to dog his heels as a leader, however, and he grew more and more severe, sarcastic and violent in his outbursts.

It wasn't long before people were being tried for treason; sometimes for an actual conspiracy against him and sometimes simply because of an unkind word spoken against him or his family.

Seneca, a young Roman statesman, wrote that under Tiberius, there developed a frenzied passion for bringing accusations; informants were everywhere; safety was nowhere; and the accused most often took their own lives rather than await a trial they knew would not matter.

Adapted from Grant, p. 96

This is the political scene into which John the prophet is about to enter.



Does this political scene seem familiar to you? In what ways are these accounts similar to or different from our world today?

It's easy to forget that John will die in his early 30s, his ministry will not last more than 36 months before he is put to death.

Now it's one thing to face a corrupt political world and challenge it to repent and walk with God if you had the backing and support of the religious world.

But John does not have that either.

Luke moves from giving us the political scene to now giving us the religious scene; notice the opening phrase of **verse 2**:

During the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Luke 3:2a

This is where it really begins to smell like a dead fish.

There are not two high priests serving at the same time — so something is rotten here.

In the old days, the high priesthood, the leader of the Jewish community and religious systems, was a hereditary and life-long office. But with the Romans coming into power, this office became a gift of power to whoever would get along best with the Roman government. In fact, during the 50 years leading up to the ministry of John, there had been 28 different high priests.

Annas had held the position for seven years and then was followed by four of his sons; Caiaphas was his son-in-law.

John Phillips, *Exploring Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 85

Annas had used his position as a means to personal power and wealth. In fact, the business enterprises in the temple court had become known as the “Bazaar of Annas” — the Marketplace of Annas.

Together, Annas and Caiaphas were effectively running a religious mafia.

They were overseeing a temple system that was bringing in millions of dollars through religious extortion.

For instance, historians reveal that during this time, every male who attended Passover in Jerusalem could not enter the temple grounds until they had paid a “temple tax” — in today’s economy it would have been around \$15.

Now, all kinds of currency were in circulation during these days; silver and gold and copper coins from Greece and Egypt and Sidon — and it was all valid currency, until you arrived at the temple.

Worshippers had to pay the temple tax in Galilean shekels or what they called “shekels of the sanctuary.”

That is where the money changers came in — they were seated in the temple precinct. The money changers, on the temple payroll, were charging all kinds of additional fees to basically extort the common people, who just wanted to come and worship.

There was an admissions fee into the temple grounds. There was a fee for exchanging currency. There was a fee for having to receive Gentile currency.

In fact, as the worshippers arrived with their Greek and Egyptian and Roman money, they were informed that their money was ceremonially unclean.

The money changers charged another fee for having to receive “dirty” money and exchange it for “clean” money.

So, in today’s economy, it would have cost an average of \$25 just to get into the temple precinct to give your offerings to the priests or stop and pray.

Now if you multiply \$25 times several million visitors who came to Jerusalem to worship — especially at Passover — you can only imagine why religion had become big business.

Another issue related to the animals brought by worshippers, which were systematically rejected as unfit, and that required the people to purchase animals owned by the temple system and the costs of these animals was as much as four times the normal amount.

The temple system had devolved into a money-making machine, bringing in well over \$100 million dollars a year in today’s economy.

And Annas is the power behind the scenes and Caiaphas is doing the dirty work. This becomes painfully clear as Caiaphas leads the Sanhedrin in condemning Jesus to death.

Now you can understand better why it was a nuclear bomb when Jesus went in there and overturned the money changers’ tables and kicked them all out of the

temple — he was interrupting the machine.

These two men would not allow anybody to interrupt the biggest thing going — why? Because they loved to lead the people to worship God? That was supposed to be their job. Because they loved the people of God? That was supposed to be their heart.

No; they wanted the power and the prestige and the money.

What Luke is doing is pulling off the mask and telling us that Annas was the godfather and Caiaphas was his enforcer.

Swindoll, p. 87



Does this religious culture seem familiar to you at all? Are there any aspects of churches you are aware of that mirror the religious leadership of Annas and Caiaphas?

So, here's the political scene:

- Immoral
- Paranoids
- Divided
- Treacherous
- Ungodly
- Spiritually uninterested

Here's the religious scene:

- Proud
- Greedy
- Extortionist
- Uncaring
- Spiritually uninterested

God had been silent for 400 years, seemingly allowing this corruption to seep into His worship and invade the pure worship He commanded from His people. You can almost hear the reader of Luke's account asking, "Will God remain silent still?"

That's why I love this text — Luke is telling us what the world is like and who seems to be ruling this world, and it's into this world — notice **verse 2** again — during this time:

The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

Luke 3:2b

During these days, the word of the Lord came to John.

God says, this is the perfect time; when politics and religion are in the sewer — this is the best time to speak to the world with the truth about salvation.

John walks into a world ruled by these seven men, and he takes his stand for God.

Now, if he's been reading the newspapers over the past few years, he probably knows this is not the time to make waves. He should probably start slow and try to win the people's approval.

Not John. In fact, not any true prophet of God.

He's not interested in boosting approval ratings, he's only interested in delivering the word of the Lord.

Mark's gospel tells us that John was dressed in a tunic made of coarse camel hair, with a belt of leather and a diet of locusts and honey (Mark 1:6).

Everything about him didn't fit in, and he had no desire to try.

His message has three components — you could circle the words in your Bibles — baptism, repentance and forgiveness.

Notice **verse 3**:

And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke 3:3

This baptism was immersion; and we know that from the use of the Greek verb “baptizo,” which gives us our word “baptism.”

It means immerse. John was publicly immersing all who came to him there at the Jordan River.

It wasn't a little water on the forehead; it was a complete dunking.

In fact, Josephus, the first century historian, used this verb “baptizo” for someone being held under the water; he even used it to describe someone drowning.

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 154

When we baptized people today, that's not what we are trying to do. We don't have a lifeguard sitting up there just in case.

John will explain later on that his baptism actually pointed prophetically to another baptism of the Holy Spirit. The immersion of someone into the body of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.

Now keep in mind, this baptism here is not the baptism of the New Testament Christian.

John was an Old Testament prophet, and the unique sign of his ministry was that if someone inwardly repented of their sin and believed his message, they proved their humility and repentance by being ceremonially cleansed.

And this is why it was so shocking to his audience.

John is essentially telling the Jewish nation that they are sinful and need to enter into the plan of God through repentance, just like the Gentiles. By doing an about face, leaving their lives of secret and public sin and asking God for forgiveness, they can be right with Him.

And John assures them here that forgiveness was actually possible.

This would have been unthinkable to the average person, and incredibly encouraging — that God would forgive them if they came to Him with repentant hearts. What about all the sacrifices and all the rules and rituals?

The religions of this day oppressed the people with fear; the Roman gods of the pantheon were unpredictable and immoral and cruel; the religion of the Jews had become a long list of impossible rules and regulations and requirements.

They were staggering under the weight of guilt and shame and knew nothing of peace with God and the forgiveness of sin.

This is our world today — staggering under the weight of guilt and shame and knowing nothing of peace with God and the forgiveness of sin.

This is why in **verse 18**, Luke says that John ***was preaching good news to the people.***

This is the good news that people need to hear today. Forgiveness is possible through repentance and faith in the full and final payment of Christ on the cross.



Have you shared that truth with anyone this week? Is there someone in your life who needs to know that forgiveness is possible for them? Do you have a plan to share that truth with them?

Let me stop here by wrapping up our study with three brief reminders that come from this political and religious setting in John's day and hold true in our day.

The progress of the gospel does not depend on the aid of world governments.

John will not get any help from his political leaders — in fact, none of us today would ever imagine that John would have expected help from Tiberius or Pilate or Herod; so why do we?

Beloved, the church doesn't need religious freedom in order to be spiritually fruitful.

One of our problems as believers, especially in a free country, is that we forget we are in exile here; we think that we are home. We're trying to get comfortable in the wrong house — we're heading for the Father's House!

And in the meantime, as citizens of heaven, assigned by God to your particular embassy of earth, whether God has called you to serve in the legislature,

on the school board, on the town council, in the classroom, in the operating room or in the board room or in the shop — remember why you are commissioned by God to serve there — to serve with integrity and compassion and excellence so that you can ultimately deliver the good news of the gospel.

The darkness and depravity in our culture can be the perfect setting for another reformation.

You might think these are the worst of times to live for Christ, and God is saying, “These are the best of times to begin another call to genuine repentance and spiritual renewal.”

The great tragedy is not that believers suffer temporarily, but that unbelievers will suffer eternally.

Paul reminds the church in I Timothy 2 to pray for kings and authorities, why? Because they are heading toward an appointment with God — for an eternal destiny in which there are no political parties, parliaments or senates.

So pray that they will be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4) so that they can join us as we one day worship the King above all Kings and the Lord above all Lords who will reign forevermore.

One more comment: by the time Luke writes this Gospel account all seven men have died and all seven of them missed the Messiah.

- Lysanias is unheard of again
- Annas and Caiaphas will die opposed to the work of Christ.
- Pontius Pilate, who oversees the trial and execution of Jesus, will try to wash his hands of it all, but never be able to forget the innocent man he condemned; he will grow bitter and resentful; he will eventually be deposed by the emperor for his cruelty and he will commit suicide.
- And the emperor Tiberius? He will live out his remaining days secluded in his island palace named after the god Jupiter; he will surround himself with astrologers — terrified of the future.

In his brief biography of Tiberius, which I read in order to understand the setting here, David Grant, a secular historian wrote this, “For years, the emperor Tiberius had prayed that the gods would grant him peace of mind until the end of his life. His prayer was not granted.”

Grant, p. 107

And at the age of 79, having served as the emperor of Rome during the entire ministry of Jesus Christ, Tiberius died, unhappy, afraid, and without peace from any of his gods.

Seven men here set the stage for John’s prophetic ministry and the ministry of Jesus Christ.

By the time Luke writes this Gospel account, all seven men have died, and all of them missed the Messiah.

Are you missing Him today?



How can you make sure you are not missing Him right now?

If you know Him, are you ready and available to represent Him today with anticipation. Who knows — He just might start another reformation today.

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