

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART FOUR

Luke's prime purpose was to tell the story of Jesus accurately because people's lives would hang on believing and professing what they knew to be the exact truth.(Lk.1:4) He recognized that he would be taken more seriously by future generations if he carefully set his account in the wider historical events of those days. He therefore started chapter three with a review of the leadership of the Roman Empire, and the various provinces in which the Jews were living. Following the death of Herod the Great, his territory was given first to his son Archelaus who also died ten years later, and then on Archelaus' death divided into four parts among 3 of Herod the Great's other sons, with Judea being kept under the direct rule of Rome, Pontius Pilate being the governor. He also referred to the joint high priests of that time, resulting from the Romans deposing Annas and appointing his son Caiaphas. The Jews did not accept Roman authority to do this so compromised conveniently by regarding it as a joint role. John's ministry began in the 15th year of the reign of the emperor Tiberias which fixes it historically in 28 or 29 AD because Tiberias became emperor in 14 AD.

John's ministry started when God gave him something to say. His years of preparation for preaching took place in the desert,(1:80) where he learned to listen to what God first taught him. Whether he had any contact with the Essene monastic community based at Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found in 1947, we do not know for certain.(3:1,2)

What is crystal clear is his message of repentance from sin, seeking God's forgiveness, and using water baptism as an outward picture of sin being washed away. He was recognized to be the fulfillment of Isaiah 40:3 which promised someone who would be a voice preparing for the coming of the Messiah, the Saviour, described by John as the Word.(Jn.1:1) His work was that of every witness of Christ since, to open the path for Jesus to come into people's lives. Good preaching untangles our twisted thinking and complicated excuses so that the logic of the gospel becomes inescapably clear.(3:3-6)

John challenged the crowds who flocked to hear him and apparently responded in great numbers,(Matt.3:5,6) to be honest about their motives. Were they just trying to escape God's judgement or did they really want revolutionary change in their lives? He was well aware of the Jewish people's excuse that because they were children of Abraham, they must be in favour with God. He warned them that time was short if they were to escape the consequence of their empty religion. He gave three examples of what true repentance looked like in practice. For everyone it means sharing whatever we have with the needy around us. For government workers, in this case tax collectors, it means being absolutely fair and taking no advantage by bribery or dishonesty. For soldiers it included not using their power to abuse the people they controlled. It did not automatically include changing their occupations to something more pleasant. God can keep Christians faithful in some difficult jobs. We can colonise even the godless, secular system.(3:7-14)

Inevitably with such a successful, charismatic figure as John there would be those who suggested that he himself might be the expected Messiah. He resisted the temptation to be regarded as someone special and contrasted his own human insignificance with the greatness of the Man he preached about. He promised that the ministry of the coming One would accomplish the baptism by the Holy Spirit in contrast to his own mere use of water. It would not be until Luke's second book that his meaning would become clear.(Acts 1:5; 2:1-4) His friend Paul would make it even clearer.(I Cor.12:13; Rom.6:3-11) The Messiah would divide the world into those whom He saved and those who chose to be judged.(3:15-17)

John also fearlessly challenged the king about the public adultery he had committed with his brother's wife when he should have been an example to his people. His refusal to be silenced eventually got him into prison.(3:18-20)

One day, John's cousin, Jesus, appeared among the crowds asking also to be baptized. Matthew records John's initial unwillingness.(Matt.3:14) Luke only describes the amazing sequel. In response to Jesus' prayer of readiness and availability, heaven opened, the Spirit descended in the form of a dove, and God spoke. The same picture had been used when Noah opened the ark and the dove returned with good news of a new world waiting to be occupied.(Gen.8:8-12) Jesus had been anointed with the Spirit and power for His ministry.(Acts 10:38) The voice from heaven confirmed the identity of the one just baptized as the Son of God and gave Him an assurance that God was pleased with Him, which must have freed Him from trying to please people throughout His ministry.(3:21,22)

The exact age of Jesus at the start of His ministry is not known but it was about 30. Joseph became prime minister of Egypt at 30,(Gen.41:46) and David become king of Israel at the same age.(II Sam.5:4) How long John ministered before Jesus began is also unknown. It may have been months or even several years. The date must have been close to 30 AD. His ancestry as recorded by Luke differs in the first part from the one in Matthew, presumably because it is the actual record of Mary's forebears rather than Joseph's. From David onwards the lists are the same back to Abraham. There are minor differences from Genesis 5 which indicate that the Old Testament list of names was not exhaustive. As a catalogue of people, some of whose stories are known and some are not, it is remarkable testimony to God's power to use all kinds of people, faithful and unfaithful for His purpose. He will do the same with us.(3:23-38)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the difference between Jesus being 'full of the Holy Spirit' and John being 'filled with the Spirit'? In what way was this Jesus' secret for the ordeal which followed? How were the temptations of Jesus similar to those of Adam and Eve in Gen.3? What are the Devil's techniques in temptation?(I Jn.2:16) How did Jesus overcome each one? What can we learn from His example? Why did the Devil leave Him alone until 'an opportune time'?
2. What was the initial response of the people of Galilee to Jesus' teaching? What according to Isa.61:1,2 was to be the purpose of His ministry? What claim did He make as to who He was? What illustrations did He use to explain why 'no prophet is welcome in his home town'? What changed their minds about Him? What miracle of protection did God do at this point? Can we expect the same?
3. What was the apparent contradiction in Jesus' style of teaching according to verses 22 and 36? How can these characteristics be combined in our ministry? Why did Jesus forbid the demon to proclaim Him as 'the Holy One of God'? In what several different ways did Jesus demonstrate His authority? Do we have such authority today?