

Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: February 3, 2008

Prepare The Way For The Lord

by Dan Trygg

“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ² during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³ He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴ as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, ‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Lk. 3:1-6

Once again, Luke attempts to tie his account to other historical events and personages that would be readily identifiable. This is the third time he has done this in this gospel (1:5; 2:1,2; 3:1,2), and this is only the *beginning* of the third chapter! He had claimed to have “investigat[ed] everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account..., so that you may *know* the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed” (1:3,4). His meticulous methodology seems to argue that he took his stated purpose quite seriously. Furthermore, archaeological findings have vindicated his methods and his accuracy. Notice that here **he lists several of these historical figures**, so that, we can cross-check the dates of their reigns, come up with a fairly accurate time for when these events occurred.

Emperor Tiberius was sole ruler of the Roman Empire from 14-37, but he was a co-regent with Augustus 2-3 years previous to this. **The fifteenth year of his reign could be as early as 26**, and as late as 29, depending how you reckoned the start of his governing. Further, the word for “reign” only occurs here in the NT. It means “rulership, government, or management, with the implication of giving leadership and direction”. This particular word refers more to the time of his *functional* leadership than simply his official sole authority, supporting more the earlier date.

Pontius Pilate is known to have been governor of Judea from 26-36. An amphitheater pavement stone, found at Caesarea by the Sea, includes an inscription dedicating the structure by Pilate to the Emperor Tiberius, proving that he had ruled there, and that he and Tiberius were contemporaries.

Then Luke mentions **three “tetrarchs”**. A tetrarch was a one-fourth ruler of an area. The story behind this was that when Herod the Great died (4 B.C.), his kingdom was divided into four parts, “tetrarchies”. The rulership of the territory encompassing Galilee and Perea was granted to his son, **Herod Antipas**, simply called Herod in the gospels. His brother, **Philip** was given the region including Iturea and Trachonitis to rule. Another brother, Archelaus, was appointed as “ethnarch” (ruler of one half) and set over Judea and Samaria from 4 B. C. until about 6 A.D. He was so incompetent and abusive, however, that the populace rebelled, and he was deposed by Rome. Consequently, Roman procurators, or governors (e.g., Pilate), were appointed to rule over Judea. The fourth region of Herod the Great’s kingdom was granted to a certain **Lysanias**. There had been some confusion about Luke’s accuracy by modern Bible scholars, because the Jewish historian Josephus referred to a Lysanias who had reigned over much of the same region, but was executed by Marc Antony in 36 B. C. He would have been much too early to have fit in the time period described here, so some thought that Luke was in error. However, an inscription on a memorial tablet was found in Baalbek (in modern Lebanon) dedicated by the widow of the first Lysanias to her sons, “to Zenodorus, the son of the tetrarch Lysanias (her deceased husband), and to Lysanias, her children”. This confirms that there were indeed two men of the same name, father and son. The biblical Lysanias was probably the son of the man Josephus mentions. He would have been of the right age and the right social class to have been a likely candidate to be appointed. An additional inscription recording the dedication of a pagan temple found at the site of ancient Abilene contains the phrase, “for the salvation of the Lords Imperial and their whole household, by Nymphaeus, a freedman of Eagle Lysanias the tetrarch”. The portion “the Lords Imperial” was a joint title given to Tiberius and his mother, Livia (after 14 A.D.). Since Livia died in 29 A.D., we know this Lysanias was indeed tetrarch during the very period of time Luke mentions.

“**the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness**”. Luke is the only gospel writer to identify John’s family lineage. The other gospels only identify him as “John the baptizer”. Of course, the story of his father and mother, and the unusual nature of his birth, are recorded in Luke 1. The Greek word for “word” of God is *rhēma*. This is a word or saying that is usually more personal and often directive in nature than the other common Greek word for “word, or saying”, *logos*. *Rhēma* tends to refer to a brief saying, or utterance, rather than extended discourse. While *logos* is more about the content or idea expressed, the emphasis of *rhēma* is often about the personal

nature of the idea expressed. In other words, **God began speaking to John very personally and directly** while he was living in the wilderness. In the OT, the phrase “the word of the LORD came to...” was a formula used over 130 times for the revelation that prophets received, or the personal direction God gave to people to do His will. **God wants to be intimate with His people, and share with us His counsel** (Prov. 3:32; Psa. 25:1-14). The Holy Spirit has been given to us expressly for this purpose. **Those who are God’s children are supposed to be led by the Spirit** (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:16-18, 25). **It often requires conscious effort and discernment on our part, to begin to understand how God would speak to us** (Rom. 8:5-14; cf. Col. 3:1,2). Of course, the purpose of hearing is so that we can join with God in doing the works of His kingdom. Hearing without obeying is profitless. **God wants us to be co-workers, partners with Him** (I Cor. 3:9; Rom. 8:26,27; Jn. 15:26,27; Acts 1:8; Phil 2:12,13).

What God spoke to John motivated him to go into all the surrounding region, preaching a **baptism of repentance unto the forgiveness of sins**. This doesn’t mean much to us, but to first century Jews it was a radical message. Baptism was an immersion, a full-body dipping of a person into water. It symbolized both a washing away of uncleanness, as well as a burial to one’s past life and a rising from the water to a new life, a life consecrated to God. There were some groups of Jews who practiced ritual baptism on a daily basis, but generally it was reserved for those converting to Judaism. If a man wanted to become a Jew, he was to be circumcised and be washed (cleansed), separated (sanctified or made holy), and consecrated (dedicated) to God. There was no parallel initiation rite to circumcision for women, but baptism was regularly required for female converts to Judaism, as well. **The radical nature of John’s message was two-fold: (1.) It was saying that his Jewish listeners had to make a fresh start.** No matter what their religious practices had been, everyone fell short and could come before God with the simplicity and newness of a fresh convert. Their failures didn’t matter, nor did their religious performance. What mattered is that they change their perceptions about their lives, and do as a new convert did: Be washed. Die to the past. Start fresh with a new dedication to God. **(2.) It was declaring that forgiveness of sins could be obtained for those who sincerely and honestly changed their minds about their sin, and their life purpose, and committed themselves to God.** This was a salvation by grace through faith message, not a formula for earning salvation by a series of religious rituals or performances. We must be careful with the words of this message which John was preaching. He was not simply saying, “Get baptized, and you will be forgiven of your sins.” No. **This was a grace offer. In order to appropriate this offer, they needed to (a.) honestly, sincerely acknowledge their past sins, (b.) intend to radically commit their lives to following God, and then (c.) they needed to seal and demonstrate this belief and commitment by choosing to be immersed** by John in a ritual of cleansing and rebirth. In this way, baptism was, as Peter later would say, “an appeal (or, “answer, response”) to God for a clear conscience” (I Pet. 3:21). People listening to John had to *believe* that God was *willing* to wash their sin away, and give them a fresh start. Then *they had to act* on that belief.

Luke then says that **John’s ministry was like what Isaiah the prophet had spoken of** (40:3). He was “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: **Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.** Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Again, **this would have been a vivid word picture to people of biblical times, but it is all but lost to us.** In those days, when a king was planning to visit an area, a royal courier would travel ahead of his company, announcing to his subjects to “prepare the way for the master”. At this declaration, people understood that they were to go out to the roadway to clear away rocks, or other refuse from the road, fill in the potholes, and beautify the roadway. This was to make the passage of the king more smooth, accessible and pleasant. In the quote, not only will the potholes be filled, but every mountain will be made low and every valley would be filled in. This extends the word picture far beyond what was physically possible. **Isaiah, and now John, were talking about the heart, not literal roads.** In repentance, the mind and heart are opened to the Holy Spirit. He will expose the lies, strongholds and false beliefs, and He enables us to let them go. As we choose to agree with God’s perspective on our sins and issues, these things begin to lose their power, and the entrance into our heart becomes more open and accessible to God and His truth. This requires work on our part, a searching of the heart, informing the mind, taking the risk to be honest and to trust. Furthermore, **as we walk in the light of honesty before God, we can experience a unique unashamed fellowship** (a “sharing together”) **not only with God, but also with one another** (I Jn. 1:7). This was one of the marks of the early church, as well as a part of its daily discipline, an open-heartedness (lit., “not difficult-terrain-to-travel”) with one another (Acts 2:42-47). When we let go of our darkness, there is nothing more to hide, and we can be real with one another. We can be humble, compassionate and loving toward one another, because we have *all* been there. We *all* have our issues. We *all* are accepted only by God’s grace. Our job is to build one another up, not to judge one another. **Honesty, humility and openness before God leads to compassion toward others.**