

John the Baptist Appears

Devotional Reading: [John 1:29–42](#)

Background Scripture: [Luke 3:1–20](#); [John 1](#)

Luke 3:2b–6, 15–18

2b The word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

3 And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins;

4 As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth;

6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

15 And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not;

16 John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire:

17 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he

will burn with fire unquenchable.

18 And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.



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Key Text

He came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

—**Luke 3:3**

From Darkness to Light

Unit 1: God's Preparation

Lessons 1–4

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the Old Testament passage John quoted.
2. Compare and contrast [Luke 3:15–18](#) with [Matthew 3:11–12](#); [Mark 1:7–8](#); and [John 1:24–28](#).
3. Articulate whether he or she should or should not intentionally seek to have a personal wilderness experience.

Lesson Outline

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B. The Coming Messiah (vv. 16–18)

Not-So-Secret Service

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A. Prepare the Way

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

| | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Esaias | <i>Ee-zay-yus.</i> |
| Essenes | <i>Eh-seenz.</i> |
| Herod Antipas | <i>Hair-ud An-tih-pus.</i> |
| Herodias | <i>Heh-roe-dee-us.</i> |
| Pentecost | <i>Pent-ih-kost.</i> |
| Pharisees | <i>Fair-ih-seez.</i> |
| Pontius Pilate | <i>Pon-shus</i> or <i>Pon-ti-us Pie-lut.</i> |
| Sadducees | <i>Sad-you-seez.</i> |
| tetrarch | <i>teh-trark</i> or <i>tee-trark.</i> |
| Tiberius Caesar | <i>Tie-beer-ee-us See-zer.</i> |

Introduction

A. Wilderness Experiences

For a season I worked as an intern at a church located in the Navajo Nation in Arizona. I learned that living in a new location gave me new opportunities to deepen my relationship with God. The internship became a wilderness experience—both physically and spiritually. As I served the congregation, I better understood my personal limitations regarding ministry. Though the experience challenged me, it also led me to grow as a servant of the body of Christ.

So-called wilderness experiences are memorable because of how

they have the potential to change a person. Though these experiences might be disorienting and filled with challenges, God can use them to draw people closer to Him for greater service, as in the examples of Elijah ([1 Kings 19:1–9](#)) and Paul ([Galatians 1:17–18](#)). In what may be called a ripple effect, a person’s wilderness experience has the potential to change many others as well, not just the person with the experience.

B. Lesson Context

All four Gospels tell the story of John the Baptist, a forerunner of Jesus ([Matthew 3:1–12](#); [Mark 1:1–8](#); [Luke 1:5–25, 57–66](#); [John 1:19–34; 3:22–36](#)). We take care not to confuse him with the John who wrote the Gospel that bears that name.

The Gospels describe John the Baptist and his preaching as coming in the type of the prophet Elias (that is, Elijah; see [Matthew 11:13–14; 17:11–13](#); [Mark 9:11–13](#); [Luke 1:17](#); compare [John 1:21–27](#)). John came as the last prophet of Israel. As such, his task was to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” ([Luke 1:17](#), [lesson 1](#); compare [Malachi 4:5–6](#)).

John spent his formative years in the wilderness ([Luke 1:80](#)). Some students of the New Testament propose that while in the wilderness John interacted with a Jewish sect known as the Essenes. Unlike the parties of the Sadducees and the Pharisees, the Essenes are not mentioned in the New Testament. However, historians of the first century AD, including Josephus, attest to their existence and ascetic practices. Though similarities exist between the practices of the Essenes and those of John, Scripture is silent regarding any association that John may have had with that group.

John's birth is described in [Luke 1:57–66](#) (see [lesson 2](#)). After pausing to tell of the birth of Jesus ([Luke 2](#)), Luke reintroduces his audience to John. He does so by setting the context of John's public ministry within the political and religious context of the day (see [3:1–2a](#)). Luke mentions, among others, Tiberius Caesar (Roman emperor, AD 14–37), Pontius Pilate (governor of Judaea, AD 26–36), Herod Antipas (tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, 4 BC–AD 39), and two high priests (variously served, AD 7–36). Luke states that the narrative of John the Baptist in today's text occurred in the "fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" ([3:1](#)), which dates to either AD 28 or 29.

Luke's references to these leaders do more than merely establish a time frame for events recorded in his Gospel. The inclusion of these rulers reminds Luke's intended audience (which may be primarily Gentile in background) that the Jewish people of this time lived under foreign Roman occupation. They were waiting for a savior who would free them from foreign occupation (compare [Luke 24:21](#); [John 6:15](#); [Acts 1:6](#)). John, however, came into this context preaching a message of a different sort of salvation. [Matthew 3:1–2, 11–12](#); [Mark 1:4–8](#); and [John 1:24–28](#) are parallel to the two segments of today's text.

I. The Prophet Appears ([Luke 3:2b–6](#))

A. In the Wilderness (vv. [2b–3](#))

2b. The word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

The word of God came to Old Testament prophets and led them to action (see [1 Chronicles 17:3–4](#)). Those prophets based their proclama-

tions on having received “the word of the Lord” (examples: [Jeremiah 1:2](#); [Hosea 1:1](#); [Micah 1:1](#); [Haggai 1:1](#)).

Jesus later proclaimed, however, that John was much more than a prophet ([Luke 7:24–28](#)). John brought a message that earlier prophets could not.

As *the son of Zacharias*, John was in the lineage of Israel’s priesthood (see [Luke 1:8–9](#), [lesson 1](#)). Scripture does not indicate that John pursued a priestly role like his father.

The parallel passage in Matthew’s Gospel adds that John was “preaching *in the wilderness of Judaea*” ([Matthew 3:1](#)). This remote and mountainous region is found around the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

In Scripture, the wilderness was significant for God’s people. A wilderness served as the backdrop for their chastisement (see [Ezekiel 20:35–38](#)) and for their renewal (see [Hosea 2:14–23](#)). Jesus even spent time in the wilderness before His public ministry ([Matthew 4:1–11](#); [Mark 1:12–13](#); [Luke 4:1–13](#)). The wilderness also served as the context that prepared John the Baptist for his public ministry.

What Do You Think?

How can you be attentive to God’s Word when you feel “in the wilderness” because of life’s challenges?

Digging Deeper

How will you continue to memorize God’s Word (see [Psalm 119:11](#)) so that it will be readily available to you at all times?

3. And he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

The country in which John preached included the town of Bethabara beyond the *Jordan* (see [John 1:28](#); [10:40](#)). John’s work fulfilled the

prophecy of John's father that John would "give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins" ([Luke 1:77](#)). Long after John's death, the leaders of the first-century church continued to preach a message of repentance and baptism ([Acts 2:38](#)).

The act of repentance requires that people acknowledge their sin and turn to God (see [Jeremiah 31:19](#)). Showing repentance is the first step that a person can make to receive God's forgiveness and salvation (see [2 Corinthians 7:10](#)). Calling sinful humans to repentance was a central component of Jesus' earthly ministry (see [Luke 5:32](#); [Acts 5:31](#)).

The Greek word translated *remission* is elsewhere translated "forgiveness" ([Acts 13:38](#); [26:18](#); [Ephesians 1:7](#); [Colossians 1:14](#)), and that is the sense here. When people repent of their sins, they receive forgiveness from God (compare [Acts 5:31](#)).

The practice of water baptism to indicate spiritual cleansing did not originate with John. The prophet Ezekiel described how water would metaphorically cleanse God's people from their moral impurities and would show the presence of God's Spirit ([Ezekiel 36:25–28](#); compare [Psalm 51:2](#)). Further, the immersion of a person into water served as a way for non-Jews (Gentiles) to signify their conversion to Judaism. Archaeological findings reveal that first-century Jewish neighborhoods and homes sometimes included large ritual baths where this practice took place.

John's baptism prepared his audience to receive God's coming salvation. The act of baptism served as a tangible and outward presentation of an inward change of heart. But since John's *baptism of repentance* was preparatory in nature, believers who had received that baptism needed also to be baptized again "in the name of the Lord Jesus" after His ascension. This baptism affirmed their belief in Him and resulted in their

receiving the Holy Spirit ([Acts 19:1–6](#)).

We see the longer, Trinitarian formula of “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” in [Matthew 28:19](#). Unlike John’s baptism, Christian baptism pantomimes the historical facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection (see [Romans 6:4](#); [Colossians 2:12](#); [1 Peter 3:21](#)).

What Do You Think?

How is repentance for sins necessary in the life of an already baptized believer?

Digging Deeper

How can you incorporate the practice of repentance into your daily rhythms?

B. Fulfilling an Ancient Message (vv. 4–6)

4. As it is written in the book of the words of Esaias the prophet, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

Luke quoted *the words of Esaias the prophet* (Isaiah) in order to show that John’s message fulfilled the Old Testament prophets. A close word-by-word comparison between [Isaiah 40:3–5](#) and [Luke 3:4–6](#) will show differences between the two texts. This is because Luke quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament. The differences between the texts highlight how Luke interpreted the words of the prophet.

The context of what was *written* by the Old Testament prophet celebrated the return of captive Israelites to a restored Jerusalem (see [Isaiah 40:1–2](#)). The people were to declare God’s faithfulness to Jerusalem

(40:9–11) and to all people who “wait upon the Lord” (40:31). God’s restoration and salvation was seen to be at hand for His people.

Luke took the premise of the prophet’s text and applied its proclamation to John—he would call people to prepare for God’s work of salvation. John provided spiritual direction in light of God’s salvation.

John was like *one crying in the wilderness*, preaching a message of repentance, forgiveness, and baptism (see Luke 1:80; 3:2–3). He proclaimed a message of hope to *prepare* the people to repent and accept God’s redemptive work. Luke’s audience would have understood the immediate connection between *the Lord* and Christ Jesus (compare 1:43, 76; 2:11).

What Do You Think?

How will you follow the example of John and “prepare ... the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4) among your neighbors?

Digging Deeper

What are possible “wilderness experiences” that have prepared you to communicate the gospel to other people?

5. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth.

All four Gospel accounts quote sections of Isaiah 40:3 to describe John’s ministry (see Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4–6; John 1:23). The other Gospel accounts do not include the material from Isaiah 40:4–5 that is found in Luke 3:5–6.

The metaphor of land being *filled* and *brought low* is an image for the humbling nature of repentance (compare Luke 1:52; 14:11; 18:14). Children of God, those people who express repentance for their sin, will have

the *crooked* and perverse ways of their lives *made straight* (see [Philippians 2:15](#)).

By quoting the prophet in this manner, Luke illustrates the scope of God’s salvation (see [Luke 2:30–32](#)). His salvation serves to “guide our feet into the way of peace” ([1:79](#); see [lesson 2](#)).

Filling Potholes

When I lived overseas, springtime was pothole season. After months of winter freezes, giant potholes would appear in our city’s streets. As temperatures warmed and ice melted, these holes grew and posed a danger to vehicles and drivers.

The local government did not prioritize road maintenance. Once in a while, citizens would take issues into their own hands and fix the ever-deepening chasms. They would sometimes gather large tree branches and place them in the potholes. The branches filled the craters and warned unaware drivers regarding the danger to their vehicles. The fix was temporary, but it protected drivers until the city could provide a more permanent fix.

God’s salvation is a permanent fix for humanity. When people accept God’s salvation, the “crooked” and “rough ways” of sinful humanity will be made “straight” and “smooth” ([Luke 3:5](#)). Are you making temporary fixes to your life, or have you accepted the permanent fix of God’s salvation?

—L. M. W.

6. And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Luke passed over Isaiah’s mention of “the glory of the Lord” ([Isaiah 40:5](#)). Instead, Luke interpreted God’s glory as *the salvation of God*, an

interpretation supported by the Greek version of Isaiah’s text. *All flesh* describes the reach of God’s salvation. People from all the earth would someday experience God’s plan of salvation (see [Psalm 98:2](#); [Isaiah 52:10](#); compare [Acts 28:28](#)). God’s salvation will be proclaimed throughout the world, though not all people will accept it (see [Matthew 7:14](#)).

II. The Prophet’s Identity ([Luke 3:15–18](#))

A. The Crowd’s Expectation (v. 15)

15. And as the people were in expectation, and all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ, or not.

First-century expectations regarding the Jewish Messiah—the anointed Jewish king (compare [2 Samuel 7:16](#); [22:48–51](#); [Daniel 9:25](#); [Acts 1:6](#); etc.)—varied greatly. Some Jews expected that the Messiah would be a military leader who would free the Jewish people from foreign oppression. Other Jews anticipated that the Messiah would come in the form of a prophet like Moses (compare [Deuteronomy 18:18](#)). The title *Christ* is the Greek equivalent of *Messiah* (see [John 1:41](#); [4:25](#)). Both terms mean “the anointed one.”

Both Romans and Jewish religious leaders considered zealous messianic expectations to be dangerous because those beliefs might lead to violence or rebellion. Religious zealots at that time frequently attracted violent followers (see [Acts 5:36–37](#)). The *expectation* of the crowd before John was not one of mild interest. The crowd had a deep curiosity regarding the possible presence of the Messiah.

When Jesus proclaimed something that only a Messiah could proclaim—like the forgiveness of sins—people considered the implications

of the teaching *in their hearts* (see [Matthew 21:25](#); [Mark 2:6–8](#); [Luke 5:21–22](#)). John’s proclamation regarding God’s plan of salvation brought many people to wonder about the extent of God’s plan. The crowds were also likely curious of the identity of the person who would inaugurate that plan.



Visual for [Lesson 3](#). Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, “What does it mean to be baptized with water and fire?”

Determining whether *John* was the promised Messiah was the central concern of the crowd. By the time of his public ministry, he had a following of disciples (see [Luke 5:33](#); [7:18–19](#)). His following continued even

after his death (see [Acts 18:24–25](#); [19:1–3](#)). John, however, denied that he was the long-awaited *Christ*, the Messiah (see [John 1:20](#)).

B. The Coming Messiah (vv. 16–18)

16a. John answered, saying unto them all, I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.

John picked up on the crowd’s thoughts regarding his possible identity. He *answered* the crowd and offered a contrast between his work and the work of the Messiah that would come.

John affirmed that the baptism *with water* had value. However, John’s baptism was temporary; it merely prepared for the baptism by the *one mightier than* John: the Messiah. The apostle Paul interpreted John’s baptism of repentance as a sign “that they should believe on him which should come after [John], that is, on Christ Jesus” ([Acts 19:4](#)).

Ancient roads, especially in the far reaches of the Roman Empire, were likely made of dirt. As a result, the feet of pedestrians would become quite dirty, even if they wore shoes or sandals. Because of these unsanitary conditions, the act of undoing *the latchet* of another person’s footwear would have been considered disgusting at best. A servant may not even have removed the footwear of his master.

John does not consider himself to be *worthy to unloose* the sandals of the coming Christ—he considered himself too lowly for the “honor” of this task for the Christ. John’s humility would point people to the coming Christ, while confirming to first-century believers the presence of God’s promised Savior (see [Acts 13:23–25](#)).

16b. He shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.

John acknowledged the difference between the baptism that he

brought and the baptism that Christ was to bring. Whereas John baptized with water, Christ baptizes His followers into God’s Spirit to form “one body” of God’s people (1 Corinthians 12:13).

Jesus promised that the “Comforter, which is *the Holy Ghost*” would come to “teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance” (John 14:26). This promise expanded the teachings of Israel’s prophets that God’s Spirit would be “poured ... from on high” (Isaiah 32:15; see 44:3–4; Joel 2:28–29). The fulfillment of these promises came at Pentecost (see Acts 2:1–41).

Fire is a tool for creation or destruction. On one hand, the fire to which John referred could point to the visible representation of God’s Spirit at Pentecost (compare Acts 2:3). In this sense, fire indicated the establishment of an expanded people of God.

On the other hand, Luke frequently refers to fire as a tool of divine punishment (see Luke 3:9; 9:54; 12:49). Considering what follows in Luke 3:17, this *fire* is likely one of judgment (compare John 15:6).

17. Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and will gather the wheat into his garner; but the chaff he will burn with fire unquenchable.

A *fan* is a shovel-like tool used to toss grain into the air to separate its parts. The useful *wheat* would fall to the threshing *floor* to be gathered. *Chaff*, however, would float in the wind (see Psalm 1:4), eventually falling to the ground where it was gathered and burned (compare Isaiah 5:24).

John’s audience was warned: the coming Christ would remove impurity from among His people. With fire—metaphorical and real—Christ would sanctify the people of God (see 1 Peter 1:7). He would also provide a final judgment to those people who turn their backs on Him (see Isaiah

66:22–24; Matthew 25:41–43; Jude 7; Revelation 14:9–11).

What Do You Think?

How would you respond to a person who says that [Luke 3:17](#) describes a wrathful and unloving God?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures come to mind as you consider how you would address that concern?

18. And many other things in his exhortation preached he unto the people.

Luke provides an editorial statement: that John said *many other things* regarding the coming Christ. As John *preached*, he rebuked the political leaders of the day, particularly Herod Antipas, for their immorality (see [Luke 3:19](#)). This led to John's beheading at the prompting of Herod's wife, Herodias (see [Matthew 14:1–12](#); [Mark 6:14–29](#)).

John understood his role as a servant of God. He proclaimed the message of God's plan of salvation that was arriving in Christ Jesus. This message was good news and told that a way out of sin and spiritual condemnation had arrived for all people!

What Do You Think?

In what ways can believers exhort others to know and follow Jesus Christ?

Digging Deeper

What steps will you take to be better prepared to urge other people regarding the gospel of Jesus?

Not-So-Secret Service

Preparing for a visit from the president of the United States requires numerous Secret Service agents. They arrive months before the president's visit. Their task is simple: ensure the safety of the president and oversee the security of the visit.

Agents meet with local law enforcement, plan the route of the president's motorcade, and complete background checks of anyone who might interact with the president. During the president's visit, Secret Service agents are on high alert for every contingency. A pouch of blood that matches the president's blood type is even kept in the heavily armored presidential limousine.

John's service for God was *not* secretive. He preached and exhorted people to listen to his message of repentance. Through what not-so-secretive way might you prepare other people to receive God's salvation through Christ Jesus?

—L. M. W.

Conclusion

A. Prepare the Way

John came as a forerunner for Christ and a prophet to the people. He served the cause of Christ by baptizing people into a life of repentance and proclaiming the imminent arrival of God's salvation. Throughout the ministry of John the Baptist, he proclaimed good news, encouraged the downtrodden, and upset powerful leaders. Though Scripture is mostly silent regarding his time in the wilderness (see [Matthew 3:4](#)), he came from that place with a message that would change the world.

How might a wilderness experience prepare you to proclaim God’s message of salvation through Jesus Christ? These experiences may cost you; wilderness experiences may not bring you a life filled with the world’s measures of comfort, power, wealth, or honor. Instead, Jesus’ followers are called to follow Him and proclaim the good news of His salvation. In this sense, all believers prepare the world for the way for the Lord.

B. Prayer

God, as we wait for Jesus’ return, show us how to prepare others to receive Your salvation. Help us be attentive to the workings of Your Spirit in our “wilderness.” In the name of Jesus. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Prepare the way for the Lord!

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write the names of famous people (living or dead) on sticky notes, one per note. Place one note on the back of each learner. Tell the class

that the goal is for each learner to figure out the name written on their note. Have the learners mingle, asking each other questions to learn about their names. Learners can ask up to 10 yes-or-no questions about the name written on their note, but they cannot ask someone to reveal the name. Likewise, they can answer any question about someone else's name but cannot reveal the other person's name. After five minutes, have learners take turns guessing the name on their note. After their guess, they can check their note.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Always Be Prepared” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in their groups to complete as indicated.

Transition into the Scripture text by saying, “In today’s Scripture, notice how John the Baptist introduced people to the Lord and how he answered their questions regarding the Lord’s identity.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Luke 3:2b–6](#) and list the main metaphors of Isaiah’s prophecy. (Expected answers: valleys filled, mountains and hills lowered, crooked roads made straight, and the rough ways made smooth)

Divide the class into four groups. Distribute handouts (you prepare) of the following questions for in-group discussion: 1—What could these metaphors mean? 2—How do they relate to preparing human hearts for salvation? 3—How was John the Baptist interpreting Isaiah’s words? Have groups present their findings in whole-class discussion.

Option. Have students form groups. Give each group five index cards. Write these Scriptures references on the board: [Romans 3:10](#); [Romans 3:23](#); [Romans 5:8](#); [Romans 6:23](#); [Romans 10:9](#); [Romans 10:13](#). Instruct

groups to write a summary from each verse on a card, one verse per card. Then have them lay the cards in the order that would lead someone to salvation.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Luke 3:15–18](#). Say, “This account is recorded in all four Gospels.” Divide learners into groups of three. Assign each group member one of the following passages to read to their group: [Matthew 3:11–12](#); [Mark 1:6–8](#); [John 1:24–28](#). Then have each person review their assigned passage within their group by answering this question: Did John fulfill these words? After 10 minutes, compare and contrast each passage through whole-class discussion.

Into Life

Distribute a sheet of paper and a pencil to each learner. With the longest side of the paper facing them, have them write *Today* on the left side of the paper and *One Year from Now* on the right side of the paper. Ask learners to draw a line across the page, connecting the two titles. Say that the paper represents a time line of the upcoming year. Allow one minute to write on the time line upcoming life events that they anticipate might be a challenge or lead to a possible wilderness experience.

After calling time, have learners form pairs to discuss their time lines by answering the following questions: 1—In light of your time line, how would you define a “wilderness experience”? 2—What experiences “in the wilderness” have you had before today? 3—Should people intentionally seek to have a personal wilderness experience?

Option. Distribute copies of the “Relating to Jesus” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. After calling time, invite pairs to share their responses to the last question. Encourage everyone to share their metaphors with a neighbor during

the upcoming week and be prepared to report on the experience at the beginning of the next class.