The Word of God came unto John

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[0:00] Luke chapter 3. We might read from the beginning of the chapter again, although I want to take our text in particular from verses 2 and 3. Now in the 15th 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 Aeturia, and of the region of Traconitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, and Asencaipas being the high priests.

And these words especially, the word of God came unto John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness, and he came into all the country about Jordan, preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sin.
Reading these verses, you get the impression, do you not, that Luke has more in mind than just fixing the precise time when the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness.
But if that was all that he had in mind, it would have been sufficient to say that it happened in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. But the inclusion of the names of these other men suggests that he wants us to know not only the time when the word came, but the kind of world into which the world came.
As it was reflected in the governmental setup, which existed at the time, and in the levels of honesty and morality that prevailed amongst the common people.
[1:51] Altogether, it's an interesting and instructive introduction and it serves our attention because I think it's got some lessons for us today. So I'd like us to think first of all of the time when the word came and then the person to whom it came and then the results of its coming.

First, the time when the word came. It's interesting to the historian to know when the word came. But it's still more interesting, both to the historian and to the ordinary leader, to know the prevailing conditions in the nation at the particular time when it came.
What do we know about these persons who were mentioned? And what information can we gather from their record and history of the kind of time it was when the word came?
Take Tiberius Caesar to begin with. He is the most prominent of them all. And it's hardly necessary to remind you that he was the Roman emperor of the time.
And of all the long line of emperors, he probably was the worst. He was, it would seem, a man of considerable ability but in whom great gifts were not matched with graces.
[3:23] He was one of the foulest in the line of emperors. Capricious, ambitious, licentious are all words that have been used to describe him.

and he was all three things. He was so hated by his own subjects that when a strong rumor went around that he was dead, killed by his own debaucheries, they with great joy and haste took Caligula and appointed him emperor in his place.
But the rumor of Tiberius Caesar's death proved to be only a rumor. And when he heard what had happened, he took terrible vengeance.
Vengeance attended by terrible brutality and eventually he was smothered by his own subjects. that was the supreme man at court in the time when the word came to John the Baptist.
The next mentioned is Pontius Pilate and he needs no introduction. He was procurator in Judea at the time of our Lord and it is sufficient to look to the record that he has left in the Gospels to know what kind of man he was.
[5:06] He appears to have been unscrupulous, sarcastic, cynical, completely self-centered and thoroughly worldly.

If, as the saying is, the judge is condemned when he condemns the guiltless, Pontius Pilate has that place in the Holy Scriptures.

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A condemned man because he condemned the guiltless. You remember how he vacillated over the trial of Jesus. He would fain have set him free if for no other reason than he disliked the Jews and liked to taunt them and embarrass them.
He was a man who set the writing over the cross of Christ. You remember, Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews and who stubbornly refused to change it notwithstanding their remonstrations. What I have written, he said, I have written.
But the Jews knew their man and when they said, when he said, I will scourge him and let him go, they replied, if thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend.
[6:27] And with that their case was won. He knew that for envy they had delivered him, but relations between himself and Caesar were delicate and his own interests were at stake.

So he proposed different ways of solving this problem. First of all, asked them to choose between Jesus of Nazareth and Barabbas.
And they, contrary to his expectation, chose Barabbas, terrible though his record was. And then hearing that Jesus had ministered in Galilee and was a Galilean, he proposed sending him to Herod, which indeed he did.
But back Jesus came to his own tribunal again. And then he suggested a compromise and what an ignoble one it was.
I find no fault in the man, he said, but I will scourge him and let him go. Innocent and yet I'll scourge him.
[7:45] And the last action was the most contemptible of all. When he didn't prevail, he took a basin and water and washed his hands in the presence of the people and said, I am free of this man's blood.

See ye to it. Such a man was Pontius Pilate and such was his administration in Judea when the word came to John.
Next in turn comes Herod, the Herod who put John the Baptist to death. Not that he wanted to because we read elsewhere that because of John the Baptist he did several things which is taken to suggest that he made certain reformations.
He was impressed by John's teaching and did several things. And thought John would compromise but John didn't. He wasn't that kind of man.
Herod had contracted an incestuous and adulterous relationship with Herodias and when John the Baptist insisted it is not lawful for me to have her that sealed his fate.
[9:12] Herod might treat those words with amused contempt but Herodias didn't and she put him into a position you remember that to redeem his promise to her daughter Salome who had pleased Herod with her dancing when Herod was not enough frame of mind to make sound judgments and had promised her whatsoever boon she might ask even to the half of the kingdom Herodias put Herod in the position that he had made good his word and demanded that the boon should be the head of John the Baptist and the charger that was Herod the tetrarch of Galilee the other two mentioned as rulers are rather colorless men

Philip the tetrarch of Aeturia the region of Trachonitis and Lysanius the tetrarch of Abilene in the northeast but certainly not men who could be held up as models in morality and in general behavior these were the men who were in high state at this particular time but what about the religious condition of the country at the time Luke takes us to the spiritual side of the nation's life and shows us what the conditions were there Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests in theory there could be only one high priest but two were operating at this time
Annas had been displaced by the Romans because they didn't approve of his policy and the Jews didn't approve of their policy in interfering with their religion and deciding who should be their high priest so there was this sort of compromise made which seemed to save the faces of both sides Caiaphas the real high priest was son-in-law to Annas and Annas could continue to be the power behind the throne and we find these two working together particularly in the closing scenes of the life of Christ it was they who called the council that put
Jesus on trial and demanded of Pilate the death sentence for Jesus it was Caiaphas who had given the council that it was expedient that one man should die and that the whole nation perish not it's a sad picture that we are given here of the condition of things both among the common people and in the high positions in the land in church and in state it's a passage which at the same time forbids our hasty conclusions with regard to the cause of Christ things seem to be going from bad to worse all the time and to complete the collapse of national religion the completion of this collapse in

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national religion and public morality could only be briefly delayed things were as bad as that but the cause of true religion is the cause of God and of his son Jesus
Christ man cannot defeat his purpose and it was at such a time as that Luke tells us the word came the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness so that brings us to our second point which is the man by whom it came God had a message for that age and it's very significant that it came as it did by whom did it come since it was a matter of worldwide importance and was to be given worldwide circulation and proclamation it was worthy of imperial action what influence
[14:59] Tiberius Caesar might have given to the spread of the word if the proclamation had gone out under the imperial seal that Tiberius Caesar was passed over so too were the others mentioned in the secular government but what more likely that when this proclamation was to go out it should go out under the authority of Annas and Caiaphas but they too were passed over God chooses his agents with great care and they were unworthy of this honor very often when God has got a great work to do in the world he chooses a man who is regarded by the world as inconsequential insignificant and perhaps as indeed in this case eccentric here you have a man of relatively obscure parentage a man who made the wilderness his chosen abode dwelling probably in the caves a man who was singular in his attire and in the food of which he puttuk man who speaks of himself indeed with great humility some were mistaking him for the

Christ but he wouldn't have it he brushed aside that suggestion immediately compared with Christ he said he wasn't worthy to serve as the shoe latchet slave he was just the forerunner and when he asked him who art thou then he said I'm the voice of him crying in the wilderness echoing a testimony that had been given concerning the coming Christ in the days of the prophets prepare ye the way of the Lord make his path straight 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 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God all that was to happen through the ministry of him who was to follow and whose forerunner
John the Baptist was Jesus said of this man that of those born of women that had not arisen a greater than John the Baptist but when he said that he wasn't referring to any grandeur or greatness that John had from parentage or from personal culture or personal achievement the greatness that manifested itself in John the Baptist was a greatness bestowed by God it came from above where the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias the preposition there would be better translated the word came upon John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness it came as a power from heaven it brought with it the equipment for the task it brought with it the spirit in which the work was going to be achieved the word of
God came upon him necessity was laid upon him as upon Paul at a later date he could have said with Paul woe is me if I preach not the gospel he must proclaim this message whether men received it or rejected it whether they praised the preacher or censured him even if it cost him his life he must proclaim it you see the resources of God are not at any time in danger of running out there was a John the Baptist to be called in in this sad time of which we are reading just as at later times there was a
Martin Luther to be raised in Germany and a John Calvin in Geneva the cesspool of Europe as they called it and not without reason and a John Knox in Scotland and the condition of Scotland in the pre-reformation period can scarcely be believed when Dr.
[21:06] Hay Fleming wrote his pamphlet the church from which the reformation delivered us he shows very clearly as he always did in everything that he wrote that he was not drawing upon his imagination but that the evidence was trustworthy and he quoted from the official documents of the nation at the time and Scotland was probably never at a lower ebb since the gospel came to these shores than it was then but God had the man for the hour as God always has and however unpromising the condition of the church may seem in our own time let's never doubt this God has got his own man for the hour and God will raise him up in the time that he fixed for that event even before the world wars nothing that happens in this world is ever going to overturn

God's purpose God's purpose now then lastly the results of its coming the coming of the word upon such an obscure man a man of the wilderness might be judged to be of very little interest to the bulk of the people men might have thought that John the Baptist with a message like that might gather around himself a few followers obscurantists and extremists probably for the most part but read verse seven then said he to the multitude that came forth to be baptized of him I'm not reading the

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verse any further because what I want to emphasize is that a multitude went out to him to be baptized of him the word had immediate and widespread effect it was a representative multitude as we learn both from Matthew and from Luke it included the common people the soldiers publicans sinners even kings and rulers hear a message from all and he proclaimed it without fear or favor now when you consider the message itself you might have thought that with a message like that he would defeat his own purpose

I'm sure that's how the message would be regarded by some of the wise acres and the various churches that meet together and think that the ecumenical movement is going to solve all the world's problems and the church's problems never mind about the proclamation of the word let's get together let's huddle together in discussion groups let's compare notes let us decide on a policy to attract the multitude no you can't go them with a message like that you can't call them ye generation of vipers who have warned you to flee from the wrath to come you cannot call upon them to produce fruits worthy of repentance you can't do these things this is a refined age and you'll only succeed in emptying your churches altogether if you go with a message like that but we must go with a message like that we mustn't try to refine sin the word of God came to

John the Baptist and he proclaimed it as he got it and it is in those periods of history when men proclaimed the word of God as God has given it to us in the holy scriptures that God's blessing came upon his church and that revivals took place in the various countries and souls were brought in multitude into his kingdom and that was going to happen again John told these people that the hopes they were cherishing were quite empty begin not to say with yourselves we have Abraham to our father we're secure we're the children of Abraham but I say unto you that God is able to of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham and now also the axis laid unto the root of the tree every tree therefore which bringeth forth good fruit is hewn down and cast into the fire judgment to come the wrath of God upon the ungodly that's an essential part of the message oh I grant you it's got to be preached and it ought to be preached lovingly caringly but it's got to be preached this word that came to John was essentially a call to repentance so too was

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost a call to repentance a call which by the power of the spirit induced the multitude to cry what shall we do what shall we do it's the message that God has been honoring all the years because without repentance there can be no remission of sins he that believeth on the son hath life he that believeth not on the son shall not see life because he's rejecting his only hope of entering into life and the wrath of God abideth on him my dear friends let us make the message personal to ourselves today because we've all got something to repent of we can excuse our sins but we're only deceiving ourselves we're not deceiving God God is not mocked as a man so shall he also weep the voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare the way of the [28:06] Lord make his path straight bring forth fruits worthy of repentance but the promise of salvation and the prospect of salvation runs right through the message all flesh shall see the salvation of God he's not saying that all flesh is going to be saved but he does say that the opportunity of salvation is being brought to all men everywhere and that's why the gospel is sent into all the world to be preached to every creature and that's where our opportunity lies notwithstanding the greatness of our provocations the offer is there notwithstanding the provocations of these men who gathered to John the Baptist the prospect of salvation was there on the offer God would be the

Lord put it neatly and truly where he says wherever there is a seeking sinner there is a seeking savior and if that be the disposition of our hearts today if we are seeking the savior then that itself is evidence that the savior is seeking us and the seeking sinner and the seeking savior will eventually meet it's his own promise when you seek him you are doing what he asked you to do and what he has promised to reward ask and it shall be given you seek and you shall find knock and it shall be opened unto you for everyone that asketh receiveth and he that seeketh findeth and to him that knocketh it shall be opened may he give us grace so to do let us pray we come to thee O Lord with thanksgiving for thy continued mercy thou hast dealt graciously with us thou hast borne long with us we have provoked thee

O Lord by our manifold transgressions we are unworthy of thy regard but thou regarding thy people in Christ for his sake thou hast overpassed their transgressions and sins and thou are doing so still to every penitent sinner who comes into thy presence hear us as we beseech thee again to enable us bring forth fruits worthy of repentance so that we may be witnesses for thee in this world which needs the testimony of thy church so much abide with us through this day when we seek thee

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whether our seeking be in private or in public grant us O Lord that thou wouldst meet with us for Jesus sake Amen

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