

# Luke Chapters 3 and 4

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Last meeting we read a quotation from Josephus (*Antiquities* 18.5.2 116-119) indicating the high regard in which John the Baptist was held by the Jews of Jesus' day: "...when others massed about him, for they were very greatly moved by his words, Herod, who feared that such strong influence over the people might carry to a revolt—for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise." Some went so far as to believe that the destruction of Herod's army was God's punishment for Herod's execution of John. John was influential enough to retain followers even after his death (Acts 18:25; 19:1-7). John was thought by some to be the Messiah himself (Jn 1:20, 25), and others wondered if Jesus was John, come back from the dead (Mk 6:14). Jesus called John the greatest of the prophets (Mt 11:11/Lk 7:28 and Mt 11:9/Lk 7:26).

John preached in a time when prophecy had ceased, replaced by the so-called "daughter of the voice," or *bath qol*, an audible voice from heaven. Luke echos the OT prophets when he says "the word of God came to John" (Lk 3:2; cf. Hos 1:1; Jer 1:2). Contrary to our modern expectation, to the first-century Jew the more authoritative word was not that which spoke from heaven, but God's word given to John. In many ways his message was similar to prophets like Amos, though John died without penning a contribution to Scripture.

Jesus assisted John for a time or followed his example in the wilderness... collecting disciples and supervising baptisms (Jn 3:22-36). At least initially Jesus preached a message similar to John's (Mk 1:14-15). Both Jesus and John called for repentance of sins and both baptized.

- a) Read Luke 3:16-17; Acts 19:1-7; 10:34-48. What is the difference between John's baptism and Jesus?
  - b) Like prophets before him, John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins. How could he do this prior to the atoning death of Jesus?
  - c) John called people to repentance in order to "Prepare the way of the Lord" (3:4). This language alludes to preparation for the arrival of a sovereign. How might we as a small group make "the crooked path straight" (3:5) in order to better open ourselves to the working of God in our midst? What could be done to foster this sort of preparation in our church? Or, as believers who have welcomed Jesus into our hearts and lives, is this relevant?
  - d) John adopted baptism, a rite which had previously been used primarily for Gentiles converting to Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Like John's, Jesus' baptism both called for repentance and constituted an initiation rite. Jesus' baptism further required the new believer to *believe* and sign on to follow Jesus. Infant baptism represents the initiation, which is corporate, but cannot address the repentance or the belief, which are personal. Since infant baptism separates initiation from belief and repentance, where do they end up?
2. When asked for advice about repentance, John gives concrete suggestions for both soldiers (probably of Herod) and tax collectors (3:10-14). John, who was not afraid to speak truth to power, did not call soldiers and tax collectors to abandon their professions, but to engage in them honestly. As Leon Morris puts it, "John's answers [to questions of how the way of repentance affected particular callings], however, reveal a recognition that each calling in life has its own temptations and that it is the mark of the truly penitent to resist them."
    - a) What are the temptations associated with your profession?
    - b) Can you think of modern examples of being an honest member of a corrupt organization which parallel the soldier and tax collector of John's day? How corrupt does the organization have to be

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<sup>1</sup> In this way John underscored that one was not automatically "in" because of one's ancestry. Like the Gentiles, Jews needed to repent and be baptized.

before personal honesty isn't enough to justify participation in the organization?

3. It was common for Jews to trust in their heritage as sons of Abraham as the basis of their salvation. Put simply, if you were a Jew, you were *in* unless you allowed your own wicked deeds to exempt you from God's family and favor. John roundly condemns this (3:8). This perspective is an element of modern Jewish thought:

Contrary to our traditional Christian assumption, [Jewish] discussions about the Law do not arise out of an anxious striving to earn one's way to heaven. Jewish thought generally assumes that Jews are *already* saved, because God graciously chose Israel as his people. In their minds, the Law teaches them how to live in a way that pleases a loving God and upholds their covenantal relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Whose attitude should we adopt, that described by Tverberg above, or that preached by John and Jesus? What Scripture passages support your answer?

4. In the first temptation in the desert, the devil suggests that Jesus, who is famished, “command this stone to become a loaf of bread” (4:1-4). Jesus later creates bread when feeding the 5,000 families, and turns water to wine at a wedding, and even fills his disciples' nets with so many fish they can't pull them out. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would assure his disciples that God knows their needs and will “give good things to those who ask him” (Mt 7:11). If the issue is one of autonomy versus first seeking God's will, we might note that Jesus exercised authority in various circumstances without first turning to God in prayer; this is true of the four major exorcisms described in the Gospels as well as in Jesus' stilling of the storm.
  - a) Why was it wrong for Jesus to change a stone to bread?
  - b) Jesus responds by quoting Deut 8:3: “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” Read Deut 8:1-3. What is the context of this verse? What does it mean?
5. [Watch *The Passion of the Christ*, 4:57-9:11] The temptation in the desert is often, but not always, pictured as a conversation between the the devil in physical form and a tired and hungry Jesus.

The story does not envisage Jesus engaged in conversation with a visible figure to whom he could talk as one to another; the devil's voice appears as a string of natural ideas in his own head. They are plausible, attractive, and make, as we would say, a lot of sense.<sup>3</sup>

Leon Morris adds, “The problem for Jesus was to know whether the voice he now heard came from the same source as the heavenly voice.”<sup>4</sup> This picture of the temptations is less Hollywood and more insidious: The figure with the horns and pitchfork is easily recognized; the words in one's head require discernment. This theory raises a general question about the way Satan tempts and accuses us. Dennis McCallum writes on this topic,

We know Satan can speak directly into our minds. Jesus talked about his snatching the gospel from people's hearts before they can understand it, which implies that he can work on the inside of people. In 1 Chron 21:1, he put into David's mind the idea of numbering the people of Israel. He is called the tempter, and few of us have heard audible voices tempting us; if Satan is tempting and accusing Christians, he must be doing it through mental communication. Therefore, thoughts coming into our heads could be from Satan.<sup>5</sup>

- a) Is mental Satanic suggestion consistent with the biblical witness? If not through this mechanism, how might Satan be accomplishing the activities Scripture attributes to him?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lois Tverberg, *Walking in the Dust of Rabbi Jesus*, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> N. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> *The Gospel According to St. Luke*, p. 102.

<sup>5</sup> *Satan and his Kingdom* (Bethany House, 2009), 100. Note that believing Satan can impart mental suggestions is not the same as believing Satan can read our thoughts.

<sup>6</sup> Including but not limited to: **Blinding the minds** of unbelievers (2 Cor 4:4); **tempting** those who lack self control (1 Cor 7:5; 1 Jn 3:8; Jn 8:44); taking advantage of discord to **draw believers astray** (2 Cor 2:11), esp. using “another gospel” (2 Cor 11:3). More

- b) Functionally, what is the difference between Satan suggesting a lie, or a sin, and our own minds generating the same, perhaps when we are tired and impulse control is weak? Where would it make a difference if your impulse to do wrong comes out of your “old self” or from Satan?
6. Morris writes of the second temptation,

...Jesus saw the possibility of setting up a kingdom that would be mightier far than that of the Romans. It is not difficult to see how such a vision might be regarded as a legitimate aim. It would mean government concerned only with the genuine welfare of the people and the way would be opened for much good. But it meant compromise. It meant using the world's methods. (103)

On the same temptation, Philip Yancey writes,

If I read church history correctly, many other followers of Jesus have yielded to the very temptations he resisted. Dostoevsky shrewdly replayed the Temptation scene in the torture cell of the Grand Inquisitor. How could a church founded by the One who withstood the Temptation carry out an Inquisition of forced belief that lasted half a millennium? Meanwhile, in a milder Protestant version in the city of Geneva, officials were making attendance at church compulsory and refusal to take the Eucharist a crime. Heretics there, too, were burned at the stake.

This balance has been articulated in various ways. Hauerwas and Willimon argue that the post-Constantinian model of church as “chaplain of the state” is already too great a compromise, and that the church must be a counter-cultural movement of “resident aliens” to retain its true mission. Many Christians, however, believe that we cannot abdicate a role in government without forsaking our mission on behalf of widows and orphans.

Which among Christian groups in America best strikes this balance?

7. What did Jesus say in his home-town synagogue teaching to take him from man of the hour to candidate for rappelling without a rope?
8. It was customary in synagogues for there to be readings from the Torah and the prophets, first in Hebrew then translated into Aramaic. The leaders of the synagogue would then allow or solicit teaching on the passage much as Jesus did. In what may have been Jesus' inaugural sermon he reads from Isa 61:1-2. What phrase subsequent from Isa 61:2 does he omit, and why?
9. Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2, including some breathtaking predictions of freedom and healing.
- How were the elements of Luke 4:18-19 present in Jesus' ministry?
  - How are they present in that of the modern church?
  - The “year of the Lord's favor” (4:19) from Isaiah 61 calls to mind the year of Jubilee, the one year in every fifty when debts were forgiven and slaves set free (Lev 25:8-17). Share your favorite example of the Jubilee aspect of Isa 61:2 in the work of the modern church?

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*Fun Fact:* “To this day there is a small sect called the Mandaean in parts of Iraq and Iran who claim to have kept this movement going continuously into the modern era. Modern Christendom was first made aware of their existence when Christian missionaries encountered them in the seventeenth century.” (DJG)

*Further Fun Fact:* “The word rendered 'rob... by false accusation' [in 3:14] is a picturesque term meaning literally '**show figs**'. It has been conjectured that this referred originally to denouncing people for exporting figs from Attica (a prohibited practice), but this and other suggestions are ... 'mere guesses'.” (Morris, *ibid.*, 97)

*Fun Fact for Ed:* “Some conservative Christians in Russia are using crosses to cover up Apple's iconic 'bitten

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vaguely, Satan uses anger and unrepentant or unforgiving attitudes as a foothold (Eph 4:27), and believers, esp. leaders, must be on the lookout for his snares (1 Tim 3:7; 2 Tim 2:26). The devil accuses us (Rev 12:10) Leaders who are recent converts are vulnerable to conceit which can lead to **condemnation** by the devil (1 Tim 3:6). The devil also uses **falsehoods** to **hold believers captive** (2 Tim 2:18, 2:26).

apple' logo on products and advertisements,” which they take as an offensive reference to the forbidden fruit of Genesis. (*Christianity Today*, “Gleanings,” Dec 2012)

*Final Fun Fact:* “A rabbinic saying (in its present form dated c. 250 but probably much older) runs, 'Every service which a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal-thong'. Untying the sandal-thong was just too much. But John selects precisely this duty, which was rabbis regarded as too menial for a disciple, as that for which he was unworthy. This is genuine humility.” (Morris, 97)