

And All Flesh Shall See

Introduction

The Text

¹In the fifteenth 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 the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’” (Luke 3:1–6)

The Catapult and the Climb

- A. In our text this morning, Luke catapults us from the years of John and Jesus’ infancy and youth (chs. 1-2) into the years of their manhood. The last we saw of Jesus He was 12 years of age. When He shows up in this narrative, He is “about thirty” (3:23). 18 years have passed.
 - 1. And as John appeared first in the opening chapters, so now he leads the way in this third chapter. This is certainly not because John is more significant than Jesus. Quite the contrary. It is precisely because He is the forerunner for Jesus, the one called to “prepare the way of the Lord” (v. 4).
- B. As I’m reading this text, I’m seeing it as a sort of ascent, a climb up to the pinnacle point of v. 6, where “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”
 - 1. It is this “seeing the salvation of God” that stands as the highest idea of our text, and it is to this that we too shall climb, by way of 3 questions: (1) Who Will See? (vv. 1-2a); (2) How Will We See? (vv. 2b-5); (3) What Will We See? (v. 6).

(1) Who Will See? (vv. 1-2a)

- A. In vv. 1-2a Luke provides us with an impressive array of individuals as an introduction and backdrop for the work of John and especially Jesus.
 - 1. He mentions the Emperor of Rome (“Tiberius Caesar”), the Governor of Judea (“Pontius Pilate”), 3 Tetrarchs (the most significant in the Biblical narrative being “Herod” Antipas), and 2 High Priests (“Annas”, who no longer held the office but still held influence, and “Caiaphas”, his son-in-law).

2 Observations

- A. Now, we are not going to dive into each of these historical figures, but let me at least make 2 observations:

(1) Historical Accuracy

- A. The first observation is the plainest. For on the face of these verses we easily discern Luke's concern for historical accuracy.
1. Here is but an example of what he said back in 1:3: that he has "followed all things closely." We are meant to take confidence in the particularity with which Luke has set about his work of recording for us the accomplishments of Christ.

(2) Universal Relevancy

- A. But, this certainly is not all that we must observe. For if all Luke is after here is historical accuracy, it is doubtful that he would have included so many figures. 1 or 2 would suffice to put a date on things.
1. No! As Luke sets out to record "the things that have been accomplished among [them] [by Christ]" (1:1), he is concerned with more than mere historical accuracy. He is concerned especially with the universal relevancy of it all.
 - a. Here is the reason for such an extensive list of Roman leaders—leaders in the Gentile world—combined with the 2 uppermost leaders in the Jewish world.
 - i. Such a move is in contradistinction from the other gospel writers. As one commentator notes: "Matt[hew], Mark, and John introduce Jesus in the context of provincial Jewish messianic expectations; Luke introduces the gospel in the context of world history" (Edwards, PNTC).
- B. And it leaves us with a clear inference: The Messiah, whether of Jewish root or not, is bringing the fruit of salvation, not only to the Jews, but to the entire world!
1. It is not the Jews alone who will see YHWH's salvation, but as the pinnacle point of v. 6 puts it: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God."
 - a. This also hearkens back to the opening verses of Luke's gospel. For we recall that all of this has been recorded with historical accuracy for the sake of Theophilus, a Gentile, that he "...may have certainty concerning the[se] things" (1:4).
- C. Luke sets out from the beginning with the world in mind: I want the Gentiles to see that this Christ is for them! Historically accurate? Yes. But more than that: universally relevant!

Missional Implications

A. Now this second observation is packed with potent implications for our own life and mission as a church.

1. We can learn a lot from Luke here. Because He's aware of the universal relevancy of Jesus Christ's person and work, Luke labors to tell the story of Christ in the language of the world.

a. Whether you're a Jewish peasant, raised on the Holy Scriptures, or a Roman pagan, who's never even heard of YHWH, the work of Christ is relevant to you. So he marks out the Savior's ministry not only along the lines of the Jews but along the lines of the secular world. He tells the story of Christ in the language of the world.

B. But here's the question for us: Are we looking for ways to connect the story of Christ to what's going on in the lives of unbelievers out in the world? Are we aware of their rhythms? Are we learning their language?

1. Or are we pulling away, retreating into our holy huddle, becoming increasingly tribal, parochial, irrelevant—speaking a Christian dialect that the world wouldn't understand?

a. Does our Christianity only have something to speak to those under Annas and Caiaphas, the insiders? Or does it also have much to say to those under Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, and Herod, the outsiders? Does Jesus only have relevance within the walls of a church, or is He relevant in the office, the gym, the bar, etc.?

i. Do we know how to draw the lines? To tell the story of Christ in the language of the world?

C. This requires, it seems to me, at least 3 things:

1. Presence: We've got to be there. We are not retreating into our Christian communes, we're living in our cities, our neighborhoods. We're walking around the block. We're hanging out at coffee shops. We're working at the office. We're lingering with the other moms after preschool. We're there. We're not just on our phones, texting our Christian friends or whatever. We're present. We're learning their rhythms, their language.

a. Evangelism isn't merely a project on our to-do list, it's a person to enter into relationship with.

2. Opportunism: We are praying and looking for ways to go deeper with people. We're opportunists. You can't always schedule these things. Someone opens up to you about their marital problems, or invites you to catch the game after work, or

starts up a conversation with you in line at the grocery store. We do our best to seize these moments!

- a. Evangelism isn't merely some event on our calendar, it's a way of life.
3. Courage: When the lives of others start to open up before us, onramps towards the gospel will present themselves. And we need courage. Does Christ have anything to say to the guy who is stressed out after the last board meeting at work? Or to the woman who is celebrating the birth of her new child? Or to the neighbor who just lost His wife of 30 years?
 - a. Evangelism isn't merely an invitation to life after death, it is an invitation to fullness of life that comes to us in Christ now—we are new creatures in Him! It is a regaining of humanity in all it's multi-faceted fullness.
 - i. Every man and woman has been created in the image of God, for God. And the gospel gives us a new way to handle the stresses of work, or the joys of new life, or the pains of death, because it brings us back under the care of a sovereign and benevolent Father.
- D. The gospel is not relevant merely within the 4 walls of a church. It is relevant wherever human beings are. Christ's redemption touches all of life and we want to be skilled at drawing those lines, at telling the story of Christ in the language of the world.
 - E. So to answer our 1st question: Who Will See (the salvation of God)? Our prayer is everyone!

(2) How Will We See? (vv. 2b-5)

The Word of God Came

A. But how will they, will we, see?

1. As we make our way towards an answer to this question, we first begin with v. 2b and the arrival of the word of God: "...the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness."

B. Such a statement is significant for a number of reasons:

1. For one thing, the similar phraseologies that we find in [Jer 1:2](#); [Hos 1:1](#); [Mic 1:1](#); [Hag 1:1](#); etc. make it clear that John is standing in the prophetic line of his forebears. They've all been pointing to and preparing for this moment.
2. It also amounts to the dramatic breaking of God's silence, as for over 400 years the word of God had not come to any prophet for public proclamation to Israel. Here, then, is an indication that we are witnessing the long-anticipated, last-days, in-breaking of the kingdom of God! God is speaking again!

3. But even more intriguing is to whom and to where God's word comes. Reflecting on the flow of these first 2 verses, one commentator writes: "The word of God appears among the powerful and prestigious, but not to them. With acid irony, Luke reports that 'the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness' (v. 2). The names before John are accompanied by titles and offices: emperor, prefect, tetrarch, high priest. John has no title or office. The names before John are associated with places of importance: Rome, Sepphoris, Jerusalem. John lives in a place with no name, 'in the wilderness'" (Edwards, PNTC).

Repentance...for Forgiveness

- A. That the word of God came in such a way is a hint at what this word would entail: "And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance..." (v. 3).
 1. Something is wrong with the world, with the status quo. The kings and their palaces, the priests and their temples, it's all wrong. So the word of God bypasses these places of prominence and comes to a lowly man in the wilderness and the word to the world is: "Repent."
- B. It must strike us that this is how God breaks the silence. This is His first official word to us in over 400 years: "Repent."
 1. It is not a word we so much like. It's not a word we throw around at dinner parties. You will lose a lot of your friends. When John used it on Herod, he lost his head.
 - a. For it's a call to change our minds. A call to turn around. It's a call for us to say we're sorry, that we're not right. And we hate that.
- C. "Repent." It's not a word we so much like, but it is a word brimming with mercy. It is a word of second chances. It is a word of ready forgiveness. It's a word that at once brings us to face God as both holy Judge and gracious Father.
 1. Consider what God says through Ezekiel to the people of Israel: " ¹⁰...Thus have you said: 'Surely our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we rot away because of them. How then can we live?' ¹¹...As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (33:10-11).
 - a. You can hear the voice of a holy Judge: "If you stay in your sins, you will die." But can you not also hear the mercy heart of a Father: "Your sins won't keep me from you. I am ready to forgive. I want to give you life. I want to be with you. But will you have it? Will you turn?!"
- D. And it is this same essential message that God gives to John to bring to Israel yet again, and through Israel to the world. This is why John comes to us proclaiming not merely "a baptism of repentance...", but "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3).

1. God's call to repentance presupposes His promise of forgiveness. Turn and live, O Israel! Turn and live, O Mercy Hill!

The Process and Goal

A. The verses that follow (vv. 4-6) are quoted from Isa 40:3-5: “⁴ As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, “The voice of one crying 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 become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, ⁶ and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

1. Luke quotes from Isaiah here to mark John as the fulfillment of this voice in the wilderness and the forerunner to the end-time arrival of the kingdom of God. He's preparing the way for the King.

B. But these words also present for us in vivid form, what this repentance and forgiveness looks like and what stands as the end goal of it all.

1. For while this preparation is described on physical, geographical terms—the whole world is shifting and rearranging to make way for Him—it has spiritual realities in view. Here is pictured for us the process of repentance and forgiveness.

- a. High things are being lowered. Low things are being raised up. Crooked things are being straightened. Rough things are being made smooth. A path is being forged.

2. And all of this has as its goal v. 6: “and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

C. The process of repentance and forgiveness, then, is all about catching a glimpse of the King! And the indication is that without repentance and receiving His forgiveness, there are things in the way, things blocking our view.

1. We cannot simultaneously harbor sin in our hearts and see Him clearly with our eyes.

- a. There's a reason why the 6th beatitude reads: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mat 5:8).

D. What is it for you? What is blocking your view right now? Some things have too high a place. Other things too low. Some things need straightening out. Other things need to be smoothed. The king is coming! I want to see Him!

1. I don't want all this junk blocking my eyes—Self-concern, cravings for the praise of man, earthly comforts, financial security, holding onto bitterness, my plan for my life, etc.

- a. What has your heart? Turn away from it all for Him! He is wanting to be seen by you. He is wanting to be near. But what do you want?

Back Into the Wilderness

- A. There's a reason John is calling Israel back out to the wilderness. In the wilderness you have nothing but God. Who you are is exposed and who He is becomes plain. And intimacy is rekindled.
 - 1. Consider Hos 2:13b-15: “^{13b} [She] went after her lovers and forgot me, declares the Lord. ¹⁴ “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor [trouble] a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.”
 - b. John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins is a call back from the land of plenty through the Jordan river into the wilderness where all we have is God and that is enough. Let's retrace our steps and try this again.
 - i. Would you go out there this morning, would you leave it all to see the salvation of God?
- E. So to answer to our 2nd question: How Will We See (the salvation of God)? Repenting of our sin and receiving His forgiveness.

(3) What Will We See? (v. 6)

We See a Person...and We See Him Die

- A. But, of course we know, the salvation of God is not just an action of God, but a Person—Jesus, Yeshua, YHWH is salvation.
 - 1. And it is this Person above all that John came to prepare the way for, so that all of Israel (and, through Israel, “all flesh”) might see Him: “For this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel” (John 1:31).
 - a. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was so that Jesus might be seen. He is the salvation of God. He is the One who will bring to completion all that John's ministry set in motion.
- B. The way has been prepared, the King has arrived, and we see Him, but what we watch Him do will scandalize us. For the King doesn't walk the way up to a throne, He is nailed to a cross.
 - 1. And we should have seen it coming! For that long list of names in the first 2 vv. of this chapter does more than showcase for us the historical accuracy and universal relevancy of all this. It actually foreshadows the end. For many of those same men show up at the end to condemn Jesus to death.

- a. As the saints pray in Acts 4:26-28: “²⁶ The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’—²⁷ for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel,²⁸ to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

- C. God predestined such horrible things for His Son because He promised repentance for the forgiveness of sins to us! If God were to make good on His call to repentance and offer of forgiveness, He had to do away with our sin.
 - 1. And this He did once for all at the cross so that now “repentance and forgiveness of sins [are] proclaimed in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:44–47).

- D. O brothers and sisters, if we want to see God, let us abide by the cross of Christ and make a holy habit of both repenting of our sin and receiving of His forgiveness!

“There is a danger which constantly faces new believers and long-time Christians. It is the temptation to think of the first conversion as everything and to forget that repentance and faith include a continual radical reorientation of the life toward God. Hear what John Murray says: ‘Christ’s cleansing blood is the laver of initial cleansing, but it is also the fountain to which the believer must continuously repair. It is at the cross of Christ that repentance has its beginning; it is at the cross of Christ that it must continue to pour out its heart in the tears of confession and contrition’” (Miller, page 106).