

- What was the mission of Zechariah and Elizabeth's son John?
- How did John's mission prepare the way for Jesus?

John prepares the way (Luke 3:1-20)

Luke takes his usual care to put events in historical context, naming seven rulers of three kinds:

- *Roman Emperor* – Tiberius was the adopted son and successor of Augustus as emperor of Rome. He reigned AD 14-37, so the reference to his 15th year dates these events to AD 28 or 29.
- *Local governors* – after Herod the Great (king when Jesus was born) died, his kingdom was split into four, each part ruled by a tetrarch. By this date, Judea (the area in the south of Palestine around Jerusalem) was under direct Roman rule, with Pontius Pilate as governor, while the other three areas were ruled by two of Herod's sons and a man called Lysanias. Herod Antipas ruled over Galilee, the region where Jesus grew up.
- *Annas and Caiaphas* – High Priest(s) of the Jewish people, who oversaw the Temple system and cooperated at some level with the Romans in their rule of Judea. These two men were members of one rich family.

Luke emphasises the importance of John, Jesus' cousin and son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, in two ways:

- a) *John's message came from God* (v2b) – John was a prophet just like those in the Old Testament;
- b) *John fulfilled the prophecies given through Isaiah* (v4-6).

Following God's call and imitating Elijah, John dressed in clothes made from camel skin, ate honey and locusts (Matthew 3:4) and lived in the desert, preaching about God's rule and baptising people in water (he is traditionally known as 'the Baptist'). People came in large numbers to see and hear him. His message was:

1. **God will judge** (v7) – John warned the people to get ready for God's day of judgement. Being a descendant of Abraham was not enough to be spared – they must respond personally to God.
2. **We must repent** (v3,8-14) – John called people to turn from their sins to ask God for forgiveness (v3). Real repentance shows in actions like giving to people in need (v10-11) and honesty in work (v12-14). As a sign of their repentance, John baptised people, immersing them in water.
3. **The Messiah will come soon** (v15-18) – John explained that He was not the Messiah, but said that the Messiah was coming soon and would be much greater than him, baptising not with water, but with:
 - a. *The Holy Spirit* – the Old Testament prophets spoke of a day when God's Spirit, rather than simply anointing kings and leaders, would transform all of God's people. The Messiah will make this happen.
 - b. *Fire* – this is a picture of judgement and John explains, further, that the Messiah will separate people into those who are chaff (to be burnt up) and those who are wheat (to be stored and kept by God).

There are only two options here. People will either be baptised in the Holy Spirit – transformed by Him and saved by God because they repent of their sins – or in fire, facing God's judgement. Responses to G

John gives way to Jesus

John's identity (John 1:19-28)

The Jewish leaders wanted to know who John claimed to be (v20) and what authority he had to baptise people (v25). They asked if he was Elijah, or the great prophet foretold in the Old Testament, or the Messiah. John denied that he was any of these three but claimed to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy about a forerunner of the Messiah (v23) and to be preparing the way for someone who was among them in the crowd (v26).

John baptises Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17)

Jesus came to be baptised by John. John did not want to do it, because he knew Jesus had no sin to repent from. Jesus, however, insisted, wanting to identify with John's message and to set an example (v15). During the baptism, John saw the Holy Spirit settle on Jesus and heard God the Father describe Jesus as His Son who "fully pleased" Him (it seems that only John and Jesus saw and heard this). God was showing John that this was indeed the Messiah, God's sinless Son. Jesus was introducing Himself to the public, beginning His ministry.

John points people to follow Jesus (John 1:29-34; 3:22-36)

After Jesus was baptised (possibly the following day), John told the people that God had revealed to him that Jesus was the Messiah. He described Jesus as greater than himself because He existed long before him (1:30) and called him both the Son of God (1:34) and the “Lamb of God” (1:39). This title is significant as it indicates that Jesus had come to take away people’s sins and hints that He would do this by becoming a sacrifice.

Jesus began to call disciples to follow Him and they began baptising people (3:22). John’s followers were confused and disappointed that Jesus was becoming more popular than John (3:26), but John was not. He had done the work God had given him and must now step aside, becoming less so that Jesus, who came from God, could become greater (3:27-34). John was later arrested by Herod Antipas, whose corruption he had criticised (Luke 3:19-20). Herod had John beheaded (Mark 6:17-29) but not before Jesus had reassured John that He was indeed the Messiah (Luke 7:18-35). Jesus said John was the greatest prophet who ever spoke from God, but that even the least person in the Kingdom of God He had come to restore would be greater than John.

Jesus tested and found sinless (Luke 4:1-13)

After His baptism, Jesus went into the desert for 40 days, where He fasted. At the end of the forty days, when Jesus was very hungry, the Devil spoke to Him. Just as Eve was tempted in three ways by the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Jesus faced three temptations. As in Eve’s case, the core issue behind these temptations is whether God can be trusted, but, unlike Eve, Jesus responds by quoting God’s word:

Temptation	Root of the temptation	Jesus’ response
Turn a stone into bread	Selfishness – meet your own needs and feed your own desires	Human beings must not live by bread alone, but by obeying God’s will (Deuteronomy 8:3). Jesus’ power to do miracles was not given for selfish use.
Worship Satan and receive power and possessions	Greed – abandon God to enjoy material things	Human beings must worship only God (Deuteronomy 6:13).
Jump from the Temple and God will protect (Satan quotes Psalm 91:11-12)	Pride – God is obliged to serve human beings	Satan has twisted God’s words – human beings must not put God to the test. Our role is to serve Him and not to demand that He serve us.

These three temptations focus on one issue, which is the very centre of sin and which was what convinced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit: the idea that human life can be better, more fulfilled, if we reject God’s rule and make our own decisions for ourselves based on our desires.

Every other human being has fallen on each of these tests. Only Jesus, the sinless Son of God, could resist. This episode proved that Jesus was exactly who Satan had thought He might be, the Son of God. He contrasts with Adam and Eve, who gave in to temptation, and with Israel. The parallel with the nation is clear in Jesus’ choice of Deuteronomy as the source of the scriptures He quotes. When the nation of Israel wandered in the desert and found themselves without food, they abandoned God and grumbled. When Jesus was in the desert without food He submitted to God and gave praise to Him. Jesus has succeeded where Israel failed. He is the beginning of a new human race without Adam’s sin and of a new people of God without Israel’s faithlessness.

The claim that Jesus was sinless is found elsewhere in the New Testament and is essential to His mission as well as proof of His divine identity:

- **Jesus was able to ask His enemies**, “Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin?” (John 8:46). His sinlessness shows that He was genuinely divine and that His words were true and trustworthy.
- **Close companions of Jesus for three years, John and Peter, never saw any sin in Him**: “there is no sin in Him” (1 John 3:5); “He never sinned, and he never deceived anyone” (1 Peter 2:22)
- **The apostle Paul taught that it was essential to His ability to become a sacrifice for sins**: “God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:21). If He was not sinless, Jesus could not be the perfect sacrifice for sins, but because He was sinless His death can be the one sacrifice for our sins forever. As John the Baptist had said, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

SUMMARY: John, who called people to repent because of coming judgement, pointed to Jesus as Messiah

- Jesus is greater than the greatest prophet – He is God’s Son and the sacrificial Lamb who died for sins.
- We will either be baptised in the Holy Spirit – transformed by Him with our sins forgiven – or in fire.