

The Preparatory Work of Repentance, Part 1

Luke 3:4-6

If you're looking at Luke Chapter 3, follow along with me as I read the first nine verses there Luke Chapter 3 starting in verse 1. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the 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, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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.

"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, and all flesh shall

see the salvation of God. 'He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.'"

Let's stop there. From just those few opening verses, we see that this man, John the Baptist, is a rather strong dose of medicine. Isn't he? He's nothing if not direct. He's confrontational. And he even seems to us a bit rough, doesn't he? Some might even call him harsh. And if we're honest, if people are honest, many would have to admit that a man like John the Baptist would make them feel pretty uncomfortable. He is not the kind of man people want to invite over to join the dinner party; might make the guests feel uncomfortable.

He's not the kind of man that people want to hang out with and watch the big game with. On a human level, there is a sense in which someone speaking prophetically, someone leveling the

boom on our true condition, exposing our sin and our self-righteousness, dragging hidden sins into the light, someone like that speaking prophetically has a repelling effect on people.

God sent John the Baptist, just as he sent Moses, just as he had sent all of the prophets, God sent John. And this time, the entire fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets was coming, it was on its way. The king was coming, and God wanted to get the people ready. Notice at the end of verse 2 it says, in the days of Roman oppression and Herodian despotism, in the days of priestly unfaithfulness and cronyism, "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

When God sent John to prepare the way before Christ, he wanted the people to hear a clear, unambiguous voice. So, God prepared John, not in the city, not in the town, not in the family, but in the wilderness, in the desert, alone. That made it clear to the people that John had no political interest or ambitions all. He was beholden to no man; quite the opposite, in

fact. The son of a Levite, John truly represented God. He could be trusted.

John represented the true priesthood. He signaled the restoration of the true priestly office in Israel. He was doing what priests ought to be doing. Not running businesses at the temple, overseeing the money changers, and the lenders, not running the bank. That's not what priests do. They preach the truth. John was way outside the establishment with no ties whatsoever to Annas and Caiaphas. Nothing sullied his reputation. He wasn't associated with that whole racket. The word of God came to him where he was, out in the wilderness. The word of God came to him as it had come to Jeremiah, to the other prophets as well, calling him into prophetic ministry. John is, as it says in verse 4 there, "A voice of one crying in the wilderness." He is a conduit of divine speech. He's not just a voice, he's a trustworthy voice that communicates the divine message without ambiguity, without confusion at all. John is clear, and it says he was crying out, that's a verb that means, loud. He was loud about it.

Also, as we said, he was a rather direct voice. He could be trusted to tell the truth. What truth? Well, it says here he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Again, not a works righteousness thing. Get dunked in water and earn forgiveness of sins, that is not what he was preaching. That's not what he was teaching. It's not what the people understood.

It's not what you find taught anywhere in the Bible, Old or New Testaments. Forgiveness is something granted, not earned. God forgives us as a gift of his grace. He doesn't reward us as if it's something we're owed because of our merit. Our good deeds don't outweigh our bad deeds. If we see things from God's perspective, we see how cluttered our lives are and weighed down by bad. Even our good is laced with bad. At the same time, while God doesn't allow the earning of forgiveness, he doesn't grant forgiveness to the unrepentant. It's a gracious gift, but he doesn't give it to just anybody. He opposes the proud, in fact.

He opposes the unrepentant sinner who refuses to bow the knee, refuses to submit the heart, but he does give grace to the humble. And, in fact, he doesn't just give, he gives, he

forgives, and he keeps on giving. God lavishes those he loves with every good thing in Jesus Christ. And those who humble themselves before him in repentance and faith, you know, they find him to be kind and tender. They find him to be merciful and good toward everyone who draws near in repentance and faith.

So what is this repentance? Well, it involves humbling yourself in sorrow over your sins. It involves abandoning yourself in your sin, turning from your sin, walking in the obedience of faith and that means at the very core of our thinking, there are things that we must understand and agree to in the Bible. We must understand and agree with God. There are things that we need to abandon and forsake. And there are things we must pursue. To repent means understanding the truth of God's word. It means agreeing with it. It means embracing it, because we love it, because we love God and we pursue him relentlessly with a heart of obedience, because he holds our deepest affections. That's repentance. That's the attitude of repentance.

John was calling people to humble themselves. He was calling people to acknowledge their sinfulness, to acknowledge their abject spiritual destitution, to admit their uncleanness.

Frankly, they stank to high heaven. The people needed a baptism of cleansing, and if they would humble themselves on the outside, submit to this baptism of repentance, it would at the very least picture what they needed on the inside: a cleansing, a forgiveness of sins.

And that, folks, was the bottom line. That's why they left the villages, the towns, the cities, to go out to these remote wilderness regions because deep down inside they knew, as every single one of us knows, as everybody on this earth, living right now knows, they knew they were sick. They knew something was deeply wrong, fundamentally flawed. They knew they're spiritually bankrupt. They know they needed healing. They have a conscience just like you do. They have a law of God written on their hearts, just like you do. They feel condemned. They even use the language of, should and should not, ought and ought not. They know something is wrong.

They know they live in a way that they're gonna have to give an account for. Many people running from it all the time. But people know inherently they're sinful. They need a Savior. Sure, John's ministry was a spectacle, but God designed this

spectacle. God sent John ahead of Jesus, and he was doing the preparatory work of preaching repentance. Why? So that God could comfort his people. So that God could show them his own glory. So that God could show them mercy. They needed to hear the message of repentance.

And beloved, that's what we need, too, isn't it? That's what we need, to know the comfort of our God, to get a greater vision of the glory of God, to turn away from the distractions of this world and look and gaze upon his greatness, his glory, his name. We need to be delivered by the mercy of God. There is no lasting comfort in this world. Only God provides eternal comfort in all that is great and glorious in this world, whatever it is, it all points and it only points to the surpassing glory of our infinitely great God. We will only know God's comfort we will only see his glory if we are first saved by his mercy. Our sins have separated us from him and it's by his mercy that he delivers us from wrath. He removes our sins. He receives us to himself.

Folks, that's what we need. That's why God sent John to prepare the people for comfort, for glory, for mercy. And that's

why I hope no one who hears this message will respond like Israel did, like many in Israel did, shying away from holiness, standing far off from the strong message of repentance. Rather, we need to see the mercy of God in the strong message of repentance. "God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." That's what we need to embrace for ourselves. That's what we need to preach to others, the message of repentance. It's not only preparatory to receiving the grace of God, you know what? It is the grace of God. He's gracious to confront us and then to heal us. That's mercy. That's true grace, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

Repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort. Repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort. Look at verse 4 again, just the first part of that verse. It says, "As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet." It's written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet. Now, it could have simply said, "It is written," because that is the formulaic statement that signals something of prophetic significance. "It is written." So we know because Luke, by the way, does not waste words, we know that Luke is telling us

something more expansive, referring us back to the Old Testament. Luke wants his readers to know that John's ministry, what John is doing, it's not without prophetic significance. John is not here some maverick. He's not doing whatever he thinks God is telling him personally. He's not making this up. He's not operating under his own sense of personal inspiration or his own angst, his own frustration with the political leadership, and the spiritual leadership of Israel. This isn't about his axe to grind. John is not acting on his own, he is speaking directly for God.

So when John comes preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," you know what? God is saying, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." When John calls the people a Brood of vipers, that's not him going off half-cocked, going a little too far. That's God calling people a brood of vipers. Luke wants us to see that. He wants us to see there is a historical continuity here. Luke wants us to see there is a biblical theological continuity in John's ministry and message. This is not a break from the past, this is a fulfillment of what was spoken in the past, what had been written in the past. And that is to say this, John was planned.

This whole phenomenon of John the Baptist; planned. God did this. John's proclamation, "A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" that's God's idea, not John's. That's God's message. John, he's simply the voice. He's the mouthpiece. God is making repentance an issue and John is just the means by which he makes it an issue. But Luke doesn't just tell us, it's written. He's not just talking about a historical continuity. He doesn't move on from there. He says, "It is written," where? "in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet." You know what that tells you, Gentile reader? Luke is saying, look it up. Go check the context. He's also telling us where to find these particular words.

Go ahead and turn back there, even now to Isaiah Chapter 40, because there's something I want to show you. Consider the context of what Luke recorded here more carefully. Some of you may know that Isaiah's prophecy really comes in two parts: you've got Chapters 1 through 39 and then Chapters 40 through 66. The first part of Isaiah has more of an emphasis on God's just judgment for Israel's idolatry. There's a lot of condemnation in there, a lot of warning, a lot of promise of

coming judgment. That culminated in the conquering of Judea and the exile of the Jews to Babylon. But then the second part, that has more of an emphasis on God's restoration of Israel because of divine grace.

Both sections, Chapters 1 through 39 and Chapters 40 through 66, both of those sections contain judgment and mercy. Both of them contain God's wrath for their sins and God's grace in restoring them. But restoration promises are concentrated in the second half. They really shine there, and that's where we find the prophecy about John's ministry right at the start of God's restoration promises. His ministry is promised in Isaiah. It is the preparatory work that ushers in God's restoration mercy and his restoration grace.

Take a look at Isaiah 40, verses 1 and 2, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Now notice those two words, comfort, comfort. Those are commands, okay? "Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Listen, this is the context that Luke wants us to keep in mind,

especially as we're introduced to the remarkable strength of John's ministry.

Apart from this context of comfort, John's ministry seems harsh. It seems out of place, especially when he starts calling people a Brood of vipers. It's hard to see the grace there, at first glance. But John's message of repentance as preparatory, it is in itself a work of grace. And notice what God says there, "Comfort, comfort my people." It's an imperative. It's a command, and it's repeated for emphasis, followed by the direct object, my people. You go comfort my people. God has a people and he's commanding his prophet to comfort them. Just to emphasize his concern, he follows up in verse 2 with the parallel command there, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." In case you don't know what comfort means, here's another way to approach it: speak tenderly, cry to her. There's an intense, sustained, repeated call to comfort the people of God.

One commentator named E.J. Young refers to this as a "Vigorous proclamation." I love it when God is vigorous about comforting us. Do we not need it? E.J. Young says, "Those commanded are to call out to Jerusalem in a bold, decisive

manner so that there will be no uncertainty as to the message. By this crying aloud, all doubts will be removed, and all will know the surety of the comfort proclaimed." End Quote. That is right. Certainty; all doubts removed.

Certainty. Luke 1:3, "That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." God wants the preaching to communicate divine certainty, not to dabble in human doubt. Certainty. Why? Because the delivery of his message of comfort is at stake. Threefold message of comfort there in Isaiah 40, verse 2. Take a look at it there. The cessation of hostility, the pardon of iniquity, the sufficiency of penalty. Oh, this is so, so gracious! The first part of this message of divine comfort, an end to Jerusalem's warfare. You know, that means no more attackers. That means no more aggressors, no more oppressors, and persecutors sent by God to punish Israel for her sins.

The second part of this message of divine comfort, the pardon of iniquity, the forgiveness of sins as the rest of Isaiah's prophecy unfolds particularly when you get to this incomparable treasure of Isaiah 53. We see that this refers to

the final, all sufficient atonement provided in the suffering servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. He bore the sin of many, and he makes intercession for transgressors.

Finally, the third part in this three-fold message of comfort, Isaiah 40:2, says, "She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." That's just another way of saying God's punishment, it's not reckless, it's not willy-nilly, it's measured. As bad as things get, as severe as the consequences may be, God is still in control. He's sovereign even over the suffering. His punishment is under his control. It's measured out, and Jerusalem's punishments, well, they have an end. Just as a footnote here, that three-fold message of comfort provides a three-point outline for the rest of Isaiah's prophecy, chapters 40 through 66. The rest of the prophecy unpacks those three words of comfort. But that's another study for another time, all right?

If any of the Jews who visited John in the desert, who were baptized by him in the Jordan River, if they had bothered to look up the context of Isaiah 40, they would have seen that John's ministry signaled the restoration of Israel, especially

when he started calling himself, "A voice calling out in the wilderness." They would have gone back and seen that his ministry signals the restoration. It signals the coming of the Messiah. They would have been reminded and greatly encouraged by Isaiah's promises of restoration. If they had kept reading, they would have seen that the emphasis is on repentance for sins. The emphasis is on the need for atonement because the coming of the Messiah was to rule the heart before he came to rule the land. He was to rule from the inside before he ruled politically on the outside. And the prerequisite for all of that is a repentant heart. John's message of repentance, it was preparing them for the rule of Messiah, a rule that started in the heart and then worked its way to the outside.

The first problem, then, was to deal with the internal rebellion of human sin. Once sin is dealt with, once sin is subdued, well Christ is Lord over those who are rightly related from the heart, having received the forgiveness of sins. And then it makes sense for him to be ruling from on high on David's throne in Jerusalem. That was the comfort that Isaiah preached. That was the comfort that John preached. It was a comfort that was received by repentance and faith. And that's what Luke

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wanted to remind us of by pointing back to the context of what Isaiah wrote. That's what is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the prophet. John's message of repentance prepared the way for people to receive divine comfort.