

The Preparatory Work of Repentance, Part 2

Luke 3:4-6

Repentance prepares the heart to see divine glory.

Repentance prepares the heart to see divine glory. Now, keep a finger in Isaiah 40, but turn back for a moment to Luke 3 verse 4. After connecting John's ministry to what is written and reminding us of the context, which explains John and his ministry, Luke quotes the pertinent section from Isaiah. Here is what he says in Luke 3:4-6. He says, "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" verse 6, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Now having read that, turn back to Isaiah 40 and verses 3-5. It's almost word for word. But where verse 6 in Luke Chapter 3 says, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," notice what the original wording of

Isaiah's prophecy says. A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall made low, and the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. So far, Luke and Isaiah sound a lot alike, right?

But listen to the difference, verse 5, "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Luke simply summarizes that verse with this, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." In Isaiah, though, it's the glory of the Lord that's revealed. That's what all flesh sees, is the glory of the Lord. And we must not miss the significance of the wording in both contexts in both, in Isaiah and in Luke because these passages point to the significance of the preparatory work of repentance in the heart.

Now, hold on in your mind to Luke's picture. We'll come back to that in just a moment, but I want to first focus on Isaiah's imagery because without repentance, people cannot and they will not see the revelation of the Lord's glory. They will

miss out on that entirely. The picture here in Isaiah Chapter 40 is of a victorious king. He's on the march. He's returning from conquest, coming back from battle, coming back to take what's rightfully his, which is the throne.

This is a Messianic passage with Christ pictured as a mighty conqueror. And notice first there is a voice that cries out, and it's the voice of an unnamed herald who goes out ahead of the coming king, and here's what he shouts, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" Notice the connection in this passage, just by the way, this is a clear Old Testament reference to the deity of Christ. You see that there? You see the parallelism between the Lord, who is who? The Messiah, right? And our God. Tuck that passage away for the next time you encounter a Jehovah's Witness at your doorstep. Pull this one out and show them Jehovah is the same as our God. It's the Messiah.

Back to the point. When you picture the wilderness and the desert, don't imagine something like the Mojave Desert, something like the Sahara, some broad flat plain, some dried-up

lake bed. The Judean deserts and the deserts to the north of Galilee, this region called Trachonitis, those Judean deserts, the Galilean deserts, they were like badlands. They were rough, rough places, treacherous terrain. You had to watch every step; didn't want to traverse it at night without light. And the herald knows the greatness of the king who follows him. And he is calling people to prepare for that king, to get to work.

He's calling them to prepare the way, to straighten the path from badlands into a highway. The call is to turn the wilderness badlands into a newly paved, six-lane freeway. This king is so supremely glorious that the earth itself must make way, must be readied to ease his return. And the next verse there expands the thought even further to make the herald's meaning absolutely clear lest there be any confusion at all, here's what he means when he says, "Prepare the way." Verse 4, "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." The word, valley, there refers to a valley of any width, wide or narrow, it doesn't matter. If there's a depression in the terrain, fill it in with earth, pack it down, level it out. Go further still, from the highest

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mountain to the smallest hill, every peak that would dare to elevate itself above this king, level it. Every single peak that stands in the path of the coming king all need to come down. Everything needs to be absolutely level.

You say, that is ridiculous. What unrealistic demands. What kind of a herald... Who do you think we are? Even if it were possible to level every mountain and every hill, to fill up every valley, the cost would be so incredible it would bankrupt the earth. The amount of effort and energy required, it would absolutely kill the labor force. That job is so unrealistic, it's impossible. And the herald would reply, ah yes, I understand. You obviously haven't seen the glory of this king. Then he'd turn to others and say, for those of you who want to see the glory of this king, spare no expense, spend all that you have. Spare no effort even if it costs you your life. Embrace the impossible because the glory of this king is worth it. No expense is too great. No effort is too much. Smooth the way before him. Our God is incomparably great, incomparably holy.

Listen, folks, I realize we don't tend to think like that. But that just reveals our dullness. It reveals our failure to

grasp the greatness of our God. Listen, his splendor is so magnificent. His holiness is so awesome that paving the entire earth ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times over is worth the effort just to catch a glimpse of his glory. Ours is the simple solitary cry of Moses, "Please show me your glory." Look, if we get this wrong, if we make a wrong judgment about this, and we think that the cost, the energy, the effort is not worth the trouble; you know what, we won't see the glory of God. That's guaranteed.

And that's why I say, back to our point, repentance does the preparatory work that's necessary to allow us to see the glory of God. We need to repent of our dullness. It's not okay to be lazy. We have to repent of our laziness. We have to even repent of our small faith, our weak faith. We need to pray and plead for strong faith. Faith that, what? Moves mountains, right? We need to embrace the attitude, the bold daring of this messenger, this herald, this voice that cries such an audacious cry. Prepare the way for the Lord, make the terrain level for our God. Fill the valleys, level the mountains. Don't leave any spot uneven and smooth every rough place. Our God is coming to us, and we will do whatever it takes to see his glory.

That's what John came to say. He was sent by God for the conversion of dull, hard-hearted people. Listen, people like me. People like you. They need to stop looking at the earth, people around them, they need to stop looking at the obstacles. They need to humble themselves, bow low in the dust, find no resource in themselves, find no resource on this earth and they need to look up from the earth and long for the glory of God because only he can do the work. They need to submit to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, if they're ever to see the glory of God.

Turn back to Luke's Gospel, Luke 3 verse 4-6, because there is more in Isaiah's imagery here that we need to see. But we're going to consider it from Luke's perspective, what Luke has told us. And this is John's perspective is as well. Luke Chapter 3 verse 4-6, repentance prepares the heart to experience divine mercy. Repentance prepares the heart to experience divine mercy. Now, keep in mind the context of Isaiah's prophecy is this, repentance it's all about God's comfort to sin-sick people. Sin, your sin, my sin, sin is dragging the human race to the bottom of hell. It is a terrible, tyrannical slave master.

So comfort begins with confrontation, and the confrontation, I understand folks, the confrontation with sin is hard. It's painful. It hurts. Keep that in mind as we read verses 4-6 again. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filed, 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," not just the glory of the Lord, but, "the salvation of God." As we said, the call to level the terrain, it pictures the greatness of the glory of God. But Luke has summarized what Isaiah said, "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together," with that line in verse 6, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

So if this is all about salvation, what do the deep valleys and the high mountains picture? What are the crooked, rough places that are being portrayed here? The deep valleys, they're the depths of our sins. The word that Luke uses comes from the Septuagint. And it's a word that refers not just to any wide valley, but it refers to a ravine or very narrow valley. The channels of sin run deep in the human heart. They cut through,



and those need to be filled in, those channels; that is the work of repentance. The mountains and the hills here are the heights of pride. All those high places need to be leveled, absolutely obliterated. That, too, is the work of repentance, to humble the proud of heart, to level their high-mindedness before the glory of God.

And listen, I can tell you this, folks, it is easier to completely change the terrain of the map of the entire world than it is for one sinner to repent. The hardness of the human heart is harder than any granite, any mountain, any hill; it's higher than Everest, this pride. The sin goes deeper in every single one of us than any of the depths of the ocean trenches on our earth. That's why repentance, regeneration is a true miracle from God. When the heart is divided by deep valleys of sin, when the sins flow freely through those channels, you know what? The ways are crooked, treacherous, deceptive. Sin makes crooked ways. When a heart is high and lifted up, when it's self-centered and proud, the, the paths are rough and course and bumpy. Pride leads you to rough places. Crooked ways, rough places they may have an allure, I understand that, too. Momentary intoxication, but you know what? They prove

treacherous over time. They deceive you. Proverbs 13:15 says, "The way of the transgressor is hard." Ultimately, at the very end of the road, crooked ways, rough places they lead the soul straight to hell.

That's why John came preaching repentance, to prepare people to experience divine mercy. Repentance in sinful proud hearts, it's compared here to moving the earth, leveling the terrain. It is painful. It's difficult. It is costly and, as I said, humanly speaking, totally impossible. I might as well change the landscape completely. Same comparison here. With God, though, all things are possible. Amen.

I'm so thankful for that. And that's why Luke summarizes Isaiah in verse 6, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Salvation is God's work, and that means repentance is God's work, too. Folks, we're not able on our own to fill in the deep valleys of our own sins. We can't do this work. We're not able on our own to demolish the proud thoughts of our hearts, not on our own, we're not. It's God, 2 Timothy 2:25, who "Grants repentance leading to life." "It is the kindness of God," Romans 2:4, "that leads us to repentance."

So what do we do? If we can't do anything, what do we do? Well, we humble ourselves and we pray. And here's what we pray: God be merciful to me, the sinner. It's not a pretentious prayer, it's simple. Be merciful to me, the sinner. We ask God to give us the gift of repentance and faith, and God will always answer that sincere prayer for those who want to turn from sin and want to embrace him in holiness and truth. And you know what, folks? That is why the proud will never come. They will never repent.

Since they refuse to bow the knee voluntarily, God will one day send his son Jesus Christ to return to earth to cause every knee to bow by force. "He will rule with a rod of iron." And that's what Mary referred to when she said in her song, she sang, Luke 1:51 to 52, "God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones." Remember Luke 3:1 to 2, the, the word of God bypassed Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, and the Herod's. The word of God wasn't subject to the machinations and the greed of the corrupt high priesthood, it was hijacked by Annas and Caiaphas. The word of God came to

John, son of Zachariah in the wilderness, and that meant people needed to climb down from their thrones and abandon the thoughts of their hearts, be willing to humble themselves, make a trip out to the desert.

But that humility wasn't enough. Once they got into the desert, these Jews needed to submit themselves to a ritual of cleansing, one that acknowledged they were no better than a Gentile dog. You like being called, a Gentile dog? Neither do I, but it's what they thought of us. John is telling us here that they needed to consider themselves no better than us. Nothing but a destitute sinner. No one but people begging for the mercy of God.

John called sinners here to abandon their crooked ways, to make straight paths, leave the positions of power, places of prominence, all that the hell-bound people of this world count so dear, go out to the desert, go out to the wilderness and when you hear the voice crying out, repent. Those barren places where John conducted his ministry they picture the true condition of a Christless soul, it's dry. It's without water. It's barren, it's without shade or shelter from the heat and the elements. It's

lonely. It's without companionship or fellowship. That's what makes the location of John's ministry such a perfect setting for preaching a baptism of repentance, because repentance means you acknowledge your own spiritual barrenness. It's pictured by the fruitless wasteland of the deserts. It's in the barren places that God comes to visit us with his healing mercy, turning the barren ground into a fruitful land of plenty.

Well, we said repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort, to see divine glory, to experience divine mercy. We can sum that up with one word. It's the word, salvation, there in verse 6. It's through the preparatory work of repentance that "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All flesh. Salvation is the comfort of God. It is the glory of God. It is the mercy of God. We are saved from our sins and that is mercy. We're saved to worship God and that's glory. We're saved for joy and satisfaction and contentment in him, and that is eternal comfort.

Salvation is proclaimed to all the world, and in that sense it's a universal Gospel. No one is preferred above another. That reference to, all flesh, is just a figurative way

of speaking of all mankind, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and free, noble and common. Once again, we see Luke's emphasis on the universality of this call, saving people of all kinds. Universality of the Gospel means that each and every individual, then since the call is to all of them, well, you know what? The accountability is to all of them as well. All are accountable for their repentance or their failure to repent.

In fact, it's interesting to note that all of the leaders that Luke names, all the positions of power in verses 1 and 2, they each have their own personal encounter with the call to repentance in the Gospel. The religious leaders, Annas and Caiaphas, both had an opportunity to see the salvation of God, to repent. In fact, Jesus stood right in front of them. Remember, at his trial, John 18? It says they, "led Jesus to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year." In verses 19 to 23, Annas is questioning Jesus about his teaching. He had an opportunity, didn't he? Annas sent Jesus, verse 24, "bound to Caiaphas the high priest." You know what? The religious establishment, it didn't repent. The regional leaders, they too, were exposed to the message, but they didn't repent either. In Luke 3, right here with John the

Baptist, it says in verse 19 to 20, it says, "Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by," John, "for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison." You know what? Just silence the voice.

That same man, Herod the tetrarch, that's Herod Antipas, he cut off John's head at the urging of the wicked Herodias. Later, Jesus himself stood before Herod Antipas, and in Luke 23:7 to 11 says, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to him." Boy, he is not getting it is he? He had heard about him. "He was hoping to see some sign done by him." Hey, miracle worker, come on, monkey, do some tricks for me. That's what he's thinking, come into my courtroom and let's see a display of power and wonder. "So he questioned him at some length," Jesus made no answer. "The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him." Paul stood before another Herod, another regional leader, in Acts 25 and 26. It was Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice. Those regional leaders, all of them corrupt, had one more chance to

repent, but they didn't. They walked away. They walked off the pages of Scripture.

That leads us to the imperial leadership. First, Pontius Pilate, who heard Jesus' case in Luke 23, he washed his hands publicly of the whole affair, delivered Jesus over to the will of the mob to be crucified. He did not repent either. Gospel went to Rome as well. Do you remember that God sent an angel to strengthen Paul, telling him in Acts 27:24, "Do not be afraid, Paul; for you must stand before Caesar."

Well, even though that ship that he was on was fated to a shipwreck, God sent into a shipwreck, Paul nonetheless made it to Rome. And, he did testify to Caesar, ultimately to no avail, for Caesar anyway. Sadly, the emperor didn't repent either. But you know what? God didn't send Paul to Rome for the salvation of the emperor. God had the repentance of some much more important people in his mind, his people, chosen from before the foundation of the world. They come out in a letter he sent to the church in Philippi with this salutation, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." God sent Paul to Rome for them. Some of God's elect, some of Christ's



bride were members of Caesar's household, and God sent Paul there to evangelize them. You know how Paul knew them? You know how he identified them? You got it. When he preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins, guess what? They repented. "Not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God has chosen the weak things in the world to shame the strong; God has chosen what's low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

By design. That's us, folks, right there. That's us. We are the repenters. Repentance has done its preparatory work in our hearts. It's prepared us to receive God's comfort. It's given us the, the undying hope of seeing his glory. It's allowed us to experience his full mercy and pardon. I'm so thankful, aren't you? Because, folks, we get to see the glory of God. Doesn't matter what happens. It doesn't matter if the whole world is overtaken by Islam, does it? It doesn't matter. We're repenters. We will see the glory of God.