**PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD**

September 12, 2021

Luke 3:1-20

Key Verse 3:3 “He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

Today we begin our study of Luke’s Gospel beginning with Chapter 3. Chapters 1 and 2 are being reserved for Christmas time. Luke the author was a historian. As he begins to tell the good news about Jesus Christ, he first begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. In the eyes of God, John the Baptist had an extremely important mission. His mission was to help people see Jesus Christ. For some people, all John had to do was to say: “Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” For most other people, his way of pointing out Jesus was much more difficult both for himself and those who received his message. For John, to help people see Jesus was like building the first railroad to connect the eastern Canada to the western Canada. Do you know what the number one tool was to build this railroad? Dynamite! Mountains had to be blown up. The powerful preaching that enabled John to help people see Jesus was the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It was like a dynamite. It is a very difficult mission to help people remove their massive boulders of sin. It needs a dynamite to remove such massive boulders of sin. And many people hated John for it.

Look at verse 1. “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar-when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene.” Since Luke was a historian, he uses the political leaders as time indicators to show the readers when John the Baptist began his ministry. In short, it was the time to begin the work of God. The whole situation has been changed since Jesus was born 30 years ago. Now the country was ready for Jesus. The Roman emperor is changed. Herod the Great is dead. Now his kingdom is divided into four regions and his four sons are ruling as tetrarchs. A tetrarch means a quarter governor. Now there was no king in Israel. That is why the Jews said, “We have no king but Caesar.” It is as if God cleared the way for King Jesus. John said, “The King is coming. Get ready.” That is why many people listened to him.

Herod the tetrarch was an evil man. He seduced his brother’s wife and married her. When John the Baptist rebuked him, he killed John. Later he killed James, one of Jesus’ disciples. People in those days were ruled by such cruel and evil rulers. The world was dark and full of evil. The world seemed to have no hope when people looked at only those evil people. Yet God had been working steadily according to his time schedule. He was about to send the Messiah to begin his messianic work in the dark world. What God did first was to prepare a servant, John the Baptist as his forerunner. Luke 1:79 tells us what the conditions of the people were like when John the Baptist began his ministry: “to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death.” In those dark times, God did not send food, medicine, or better living conditions. According to verse 2, God began to show his care for these people living in darkness and the shadow of death by sending his word to John the Baptist. Look at verses 2b-3. “The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Israel’s real problem in the time of John the Baptist was not because of evil rulers, but that during previous 400 years, there had been no word of God through his prophets. This truth applies to each individual person. We are miserable not because we have many problems, but because we do not have the word of God in our hearts. The word of God changes men’s hearts. Hebrews 4:12 says, “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

It was impossible for anyone to preach the message of repentance because at that time evil people looked normal and good people looked strange. Many people thought that those who were not sinning against God were weird people. In this situation, John preached the message of repentance so that people might turn to God and receive the grace of forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins gives utmost joy to all human beings. As we studied in Romans, all people are under God’s wrath because of their sins. They are at war with God. As a result, they cannot have peace in their souls. They are always restless and anxious. They suffer from self-condemnation. For example, when a tax collector cheats by collecting more taxes than required and pocket the difference, he feels condemned in his inner man. He is restless because of guilt. That is why many tax collectors came to John to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. John prepared the way for the Lord by preaching the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance is “metanoia” in original Greek which means “a change of mind, heart, and action” including the change of one’s whole inner nature such as intellectual, emotional, and moral attitude and desire. Biblically, it means “turning from your sins and turning to God. It doesn’t mean merely feeling sorry or regret about sin without changing your actual mind and action. Turning from sin is not enough. We must turn to God. Someone said that repent means “re + pent,” going back to penthouse from a doghouse. The prodigal son shows an example of repentance. He went from a pighouse to penthouse. Luke 15:17-20 says, “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against you…So he got up and went to his father.” When we repent, we receive God’s forgiveness of sins. God restores us as his holy children.

When people repented, John baptized them as a sign of repentance. Baptism is not mentioned in the Old Testament. John’s baptism was revolutionary. At that time, baptism was performed only on Gentiles. Whenever a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism, they were required to go through this ceremonial baptism as a way of confessing their uncleanness, their separation from the covenant, and their separation from the true and living God. That is the kind of repentance John was calling for. You have to repent to the point where you recognize that you are no different than a Gentile, that is, you are separated from the living God; you are unclean before God. That is a very serious call for repentance. You know how the Jews felt about Gentiles. They didn’t want to go into their house. They didn’t want to eat their food. They didn’t want to touch their cups. They saw them as despised like a dog. The rabbis used to pray when they got up in the morning every day, “I thank you, God, that you didn’t make me a woman or a Gentile.” John is calling people to confess that they were no better than Gentiles. But many people were willing to acknowledge their sins because they really wanted to be free from sin.

Look at verses 4-6. “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all people will see God’s salvation.’” John’s ministry fulfilled these prophetic verses in Isaiah 40:3-5. His mission was to help all people see God’s salvation. Jesus Christ is our salvation. As we know there are nice roads that lead to Niagara Falls. Because of these roads some of us have seen the great fall many times. In a similar way God made John into an expert, one man spiritual transportation construction crew to make a highway in the wilderness. John’s message of repentance helped people overcome obstacles so they could see God’s salvation. The first obstruction mentioned was valleys. Valleys represent those who are depressed and full of complaints. John helped these people repent by helping them to be thankful. Next “every mountain and hill must be made low.” These mountain and hills represent pride that blinds people to Jesus. Mountains and hills are cleared out of the way by using powerful explosives like dynamite. Some people have a crooked heart. It is bitterness or victim mentality or preconceived idea. This crookedness makes them interpret everything incorrectly and mostly negatively. Those who have a crooked heart cannot accept Jesus as Lord. Lastly some people have roughness in their heart. This is hot temper or quick judgmental attitude. Those who have such roughness in their heart need to learn God’s long-enduring patience. When we remove such obstacles in our heart road by repentance, we are preparing the way for the Lord. Then we will see God’s salvation Jesus.

Look at verses 7-8. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our farther.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” When the crowds came to John, he realized that they were not all sincere. Some were mere pretenders, with no hunger or thirst for righteousness. To them, John said, “You brood of vipers!” No one likes to hear that they are the poisonous baby snake, offspring of the big snake; Satan. It might sound like a great insult or offense to them. But it was true to them. To God’s eyes, anyone who doesn’t repent is nothing but a child of Satan who cannot avoid God’s wrath. God wants us to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. It means that repentance is not mere regret in words but actual change in our mind and action that can prove its genuineness through its real fruit. For example, the one who easily falls into despair and frustration should become very patient and long enduring with unshakable trust and hope. The self-centered should become God-centered. The legalistic should become very gracious and warm-hearted.

Many people in Israel thought that they did not need to repent because they were descendants of Abraham; they were automatically God’s chosen people and God would show favor on them. It is like saying that I do not need to repent because I have been a Christian for 30 years or because I grew up in a Christian family; God will show his favor on me. These are all complacent attitudes that make us spiritually blind. We must know the urgency of God’s imminent judgment. Verse 9 says, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” So, when we hear about repentance today, we must repent as a top priority in our lives. At John’s warning, people knew that they could not make excuses in repentance. So they asked, “What should we do then?” John gave practical ways of repentance. The man with two tunics should share with him who has none and the one who has food should do the same. The tax collectors should not collect any more than they were required to. The soldiers should not extort money and accuse people falsely and be content with their pay. Likewise, repentance starts from our practical action of overcoming our selfishness and caring others more.

John’s ministry was so impressive that people wondered in their hearts if he might possibly be the Messiah (15). How did John answer them? If John had just nodded his head and agreed with them, they would have made him king. However, John was not addicted to power. Rather, he used his moment of fame to introduce Jesus. He said, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (16). John acknowledged his own limits, in terms of identity and works, and magnified Jesus. He recognized that Jesus is more than a mere man; Jesus is God incarnate. Then he found himself as nothing but a servant. He also realized that his baptism with water was just preparation for baptism by the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist also emphasized baptism by fire. This fire functions in two ways. For those who accept Jesus as Savior and Lord, it is a purifying fire. But for those who do not, it is the fire of divine judgment. Living in this world, we have all kinds of trials. When we were not in Christ, these trials were meaningless sufferings which paralyzed us. So we tried to avoid them by any means. But when we are in Christ, these trials have a great meaning. Apostle Peter says that “these have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1Pe 1:7). All kinds of trials are like a refining fire which burns away false hopes—with which we are so easily entangled—and purifies our faith until the living hope in the kingdom of God overflows in our hearts.

John the Baptist was fearless. John the Baptist was a very tough man. He had to be because it is a very difficult mission to help others to repent. Turning around a giant ship is most difficult. Once it is turned around, it is easy to set sail. Likewise, acknowledging that we are going a wrong direction and turning around is most difficult. When John rebuked Herod the tetrarch for his adultery and many other evil things he had done, Herod locked John up in prison (20). It seemed that evil had triumphed over righteousness. However, from God’s point of view, after a most fruitful life of mission, it was time for John to step aside, and for Jesus to begin his ministry. By worldly standards, John looked like a failure. He didn’t have a very successful career. John’s ministry lasted only one year. And he was in prison for a year, and died very young in his early 30s. So he might look like a rather obscure and unsuccessful man. But Jesus said that he was the greatest man who ever lived. John accomplished exactly what God wanted him to accomplish. Every one of Jesus’ 12 disciples came through John the Baptist. John indeed prepared their hearts to accept Jesus Christ. Matthew may have been one of the tax collectors who were baptized by John.

The gospel begins with John; it begins with judgment; it begins with repentance. Through repentance we can see Jesus our salvation. May God help each of us to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Big Idea: Prepare the heart for the Lord through repentance