

PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE LORD

Luke 3:1-14

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 are beginning the study of Luke’s gospel. Luke is known as an evangelist and historian. As an evangelist, he presents Christ through the record of his words and deeds. He helps us encounter the living Christ and believe in him as he truly is. As a historian, Luke emphasizes the importance of God’s work in history. Our ministry founder, Dr. Samuel Lee, studied Luke’s gospel repeatedly with prayer topics to learn Christ and have a sense of God’s history. This was important 30 years ago, and it is still important today. We are living in times of surprising change. Within this year, the 1972 Olympic decathlon champion announced that he is no longer a man, but a woman. This announcement was received with praise by prominent sports networks and media sources. This is compounded by the fact that he, or she, claims to be a Christian. Has our society gone completely crazy? This phenomena is possible where there is no sense of history. Any student of history knows that great empires disappear when they weaken from within due to easygoing mentality and moral corruption. Seeing this trend in America, Muslim radicals have gained confidence to push their agenda in recent years. Having a sense of history is vital to sustaining a healthy nation. It is even more important to be a healthy Christian. God taught his people Israel to remember what he had done by holding on to his word no matter what kind of challenges they faced. Jesus did the same with his disciples. He wants us to live by his truth and to see history as he sees it no matter how confusing are the times in which we live. When we have a sense of God’s history, we are not led astray by the strong trends of a corrupt culture. When we have a sense of God’s history, we can stand firm in our faith to the end. When we have a sense of God’s history, we can raise disciples of Jesus in our times who will make a new history. It is my sincere prayer that through Luke’s gospel study we may meet Christ and grow in our knowledge of him and that we may learn a sense of God’s history.

We are not beginning Luke’s gospel from chapter 1 (which we will study this Christmas), but from chapter 3. Chapter 3 opens with the word of the Lord coming to John the Baptist, who then prepared the way for the Lord.

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We can learn how God breaks into human history to start something new. We can find real hope in God to make a new history. It happens when we accept God's word with repentance. No matter who we are, no matter how many mistakes we may have made, we can start a new history when we respond to God's word with repentance. The same is true of our church. As we begin this new fall semester, let's learn how we can start something new in our own lives, our families, and in our community.

First, the word of God came to John (1-2). Luke begins with the historical background of the times. It was the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, the successor of Augustus, likely A.D. 25-26. Historians say that Tiberius was strangely humble. Though previous Caesars were recognized as gods, he refused this title. He stopped the practice of naming months of the year after emperors; thus there is July for Julius, August for Augustus, but no Tiber for Tiberius. Most likely, this humility came from his despair. He died a dejected old man, though he had been a good administrator.¹ Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea who failed to uphold justice for innocent Jesus. Herod Antipas, son of a ruthless megalomaniac, carried out many evil deeds (19-20). These rulers used power for their own benefit. They often perverted justice and oppressed the weak. Consequently, many people became cynical and depressed. Annas and Caiaphas were the Jewish high priests. At that time, high priests were appointed by Roman leaders. They were skilled politicians, but were ungodly and wicked. By naming these leaders, Luke establishes the historical authenticity of his gospel. However, the nature of their rule is no different from leaders in other times. Politicians in every age try to offer hope, but cannot deliver. Christians should not expect too much from political and religious leaders. American evangelicals have been disappointed that engaging in the political process has not been so effective in the last 30 years. But there is real hope. It is in God. What was God doing in those dark times? Verse 2b says, “...**the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.**” Let's consider what this means.

The phrase, “**the word of God came,**” tells us that God initiated this event. God was not discouraged. God did not give up because the world was so evil. God intervened to advance his salvation plan. God spoke to John. God's word is not like man's words. God's word has power and authority to

¹ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). In Baker encyclopedia of the Bible (p. 394). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

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do precisely what God desires; and God's word never fails. God's word gives life. Apostle Peter referred to God's word as **"the living and enduring word of God."** And he added, **"For, 'All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever'"** (1Pe 1:23-25). God can begin a life-giving, mighty, new work, just by speaking his word even in the darkest of times. God speaks even now to those who hear. As we learned in Hebrews, in these last days God has spoken to all people through his Son Jesus (Heb 1:2). Jesus repeatedly said, **"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear"** (Lk 8:8; 14:35). When we listen to Jesus in the gospels, God speaks to us.

Who was John, to whom God spoke? He was the son of Zechariah the priest (2). Before he was born, an angel of the Lord proclaimed the purpose of his life. He would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn people's hearts back to God (1:17). John had grown up in a godly home and prepared himself to serve God by living in the wilderness. Then, as God had planned and purposed, he spoke to his chosen servant. Here we can see that God carries out his salvation plan steadily. World powers rise and fall, but God's history flows continually like the undercurrent of the sea.

John lived in the wilderness (1:80). It was a quiet place where there were no distractions. He could meditate on the word of God and pray. There he waited on God. It was there that the word of God came to him. These days many people are afraid of the wilderness. It is a quiet place without modern conveniences. But it is in such places that we can listen to the word of God. I like to go into my back yard in the early morning to pray and read the Bible out loud. No one bothers me; only crickets chirp in the background. As I listen to God's word, strength and wisdom flood into my heart. In order to listen to God we may need to put away our smart phones, ipads and other media devices. Historically, the UBF ministry has been strong because dedicated people have listened to the word of God more than the noise of the world. Recently I worshiped in smaller UBF chapters in Chicago and Canada and had the chance to hear the messages of lay shepherds. It was obvious that they listened to God's word, and his word was spoken powerfully through them. This is a precious spiritual inheritance. However, listening to others' messages is not enough. We all need time to meditate on, digest, and put God's word into practice. Those who regularly struggle with God's word maintain a healthy spiritual life. It requires time and energy. We have done

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this through testimony writing and sharing. Some people, however, have given up this struggle. This is one reason that problems arise in their lives and ministries. When we really listen to God's word, we receive wisdom, strength and grace from above. Recently, Loyola ministry leaders have decided to dedicate each Friday to sharing testimonies. Everyone writes and shares. God's power works among them and a new history of God's work begins through them.

We should not take lightly the privilege of hearing God's word through the Bible. There are some places in which it is hard to have a Bible. In his book, Chinese Christian Brother Yun relates how, after accepting Christ, he really wanted to read the Bible. Yet there were no Bibles anywhere in his region, for Chairman Mao had had them all burned. Brother Yun visited an old pastor and asked for a Bible. He was told to pray to the God of heaven for the heavenly book. So he knelt down and prayed daily for a month. Nothing happened. He visited the old pastor again. He was told to fast and pray. He did so for 100 days, crying out to God for a Bible. His body became dangerously weak, his soul cried out, and his parents were very worried. Then a Christian visited his house and gave him a Bible. How precious that Bible is to him! Since then, he has eaten the word of God faithfully as his daily bread. He grew to be a spiritual giant whom God used to bring revival to China.² The fact that God has spoken to us through the Bible reveals that God loves us and he wants to help us. God really wants us to come to him and listen to him and have a relationship with him. Let's value this precious privilege and intentionally set aside time to listen to God's word, and put it into practice.

Second, John preached a baptism of repentance (3-6). After the word of God came to him, what did John do? Verse 3 says, **“He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”** After the word of God came, John no longer stayed in the wilderness by himself. He began to find people and preach powerfully to them. Perhaps he chose to begin near the Jordan because Elijah had served there. John's preaching would have surprised the Jews. They thought that baptism was only for Gentile proselytes. But he was preaching a baptism of repentance for everyone, including the Jews. Baptism indicated a radical repentance. It meant to turn from self to God in terms of purpose, life

² Yun, Brother, with Paul Hattaway, (2002). “The Heavenly Man: the remarkable true story of Chinese Christian Brother Yun,” (pp. 27-30). Grand Rapids, MI: Monarch Books.

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direction, value system and desires. It was to renounce self-rule and accept God's reign. The first step is simply to acknowledge that God's word is right and "I am wrong" for violating it. It is to let go of excuses and justification and to admit my fault and guilt. It is recognizing that I should change, and not expecting God to change. For example, God's word tells fathers to discipline their sons in the ways of the Lord. But I neglected this duty in a specific instance with my third son, Daniel. I am in the wrong, in need of God's forgiveness, and need to change. Repentance may initially be motivated by fear of consequence. But as we understand sin more deeply, we come to realize that God's heart felt pain because of my sin, and that others were damaged. Then we can begin to feel godly sorrow for our sins. Repentance is not done by our own strength. It is God who works in us to bring us to repentance.

In order to repent we need to know what sin is. As we read the Ten Commandments we can find the sins of idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking, disobedience, murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and covetousness. Other descriptions of sin include greed, selfishness, laziness, gluttony, malice, envy, sexual immorality, gossip, jealousy, slander "and the like"—which indicates more, for people invent ways of doing evil. Just as there are sins of commission, there are also sins of omission—not doing what I should have done. Irresponsibility, indifference, neglect, fear, despair, laziness and the like produce these sins. Ecclesiastes 7:20 says, **"Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins."** The message of repentance should lead us all to stand before God in humility as sinners in need of his grace. As a mature Christian, St. Paul confessed: **"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst"** (1Ti 1:15b). Martin Luther said that all Christians are both righteous and sinners at the same time as long as they live. So we can always repent. I find that I need to repent daily for not loving God wholeheartedly and not loving my wife as Christ loves the church. I am sure that we can all find at least one way to repent. We should also share the message of repentance as we study the Bible with others. These days there is a great respect for political correctness. But as God's servants we must share the truth about sin and call for repentance. Repentance itself does not solve our sin problem; but it prepares our hearts for God's forgiveness.

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In verses 4-6 Luke shows that the ministry of John the Baptist fulfilled prophecy by quoting from Isaiah. This poetic passage gives us a metaphorical understanding of repentance. It is like preparing for the coming of a king. Repentance anticipates the coming of the Lord. So it is not all humiliation and sorrow, there is also a clear reason for hope. When the Lord comes, **“All people will see God’s salvation”** (6). The word “salvation” appears six times in Luke’s gospel (1:69,71,77; 2:30; 3:6; 19:9). It refers to the coming of Jesus and his work to save his people from their enemies, forgive their sins, and restore their relationship with God. He made a new world, a perfect paradise. Jesus did this through his suffering, death and resurrection. This amazing grace of salvation is good news. Those who prepare the way for the Lord through repentance will be abundantly blessed and comforted.

Third, produce fruit in keeping with repentance (7-14). Verses 7-14 tell us in detail the contents of John’s message and how people responded. Many people came to him. They heard God’s word through his message. They wanted to drink it in like thirsty deer lapping streams of water. But John did not praise them. Rather, he challenged them sternly by calling them a brood of vipers. Holy John sounds a little like General Patton. He said in verse 8a, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”** John was not satisfied when people responded well with their mouths. He called for lifelong struggle that resulted in real change. This is what it means to “keep with” repentance. It is to stand before God moment by moment, holding his words in our hearts, humbly asking his mercy, until he changes us by his grace. This is sanctification, which produces the fruit of a godly character. The Lord wants each of us to change through repentance until we bear the image of God. But there was a problem for the Jews. They felt entitled to God’s blessings on the basis of their physical descent from Abraham. They expected God to bless them even if they didn’t repent. John rebuked them to deny their sense of entitlement, for God could raise up physical descendants of Abraham from rocks. They needed to repent and receive forgiveness and become spiritual children of God. And the time was now. Using the imagery of an ax and trees, John proclaimed that God was going to judge the nation and its people. His standard was fruit—good fruit. Those without good fruit would be condemned (9).

People were cut to the heart by John’s message. They wanted to know what they needed to do (10). They were ready to do anything. John taught

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them how to repent practically. Those with extra clothes and food should share with those in need (11). Even selfish tax collectors and hard-hearted soldiers were pierced by John's message; they too asked what they should do. John did not tell them to change their careers and become temple priests. He did not even tell them to share with others. He told them to stop cheating and extortion. He helped them struggle to overcome greed and to do an honest day's work for an honest day's pay (12-14). This guided them not to live by the spirit of the dark world, but to live by God's truth with integrity. Maybe their motto was: "Be honest! Work hard! Share with those in need!" Repentance is more than an internal struggle; it involves doing something practical. The Ephesians who repented for witchcraft publicly burned their sorcery scrolls (Ac 19:19). In the same way, some people have publicly destroyed pornographic materials or ungodly music collections. In regards to training my son Daniel, I repented practically, too. During my family retreat, I engaged him in several days of home repairs. We worked hard together to pour concrete, build a staircase and a gate, and to sand and paint. He learned some helpful skills and how to get up early and work hard until a job is done. He asked me, "Dad, why are you working so hard during your retreat time?" I told him, "So you can learn to work hard."

Today we have learned that God gives his word to us and we need to really listen to what he says until it comes into our hearts. We need to respond to his word with repentance and let it correct our attitudes and behavior. This is how we can prepare the way for the Lord. Let's begin Luke's gospel study with sincere repentance, by God's grace, so that we may see God's great salvation. May God help us to know Jesus more deeply and to have a sense of God's history.