

1. Identified by John

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[0 : 00] Now, if you have the Bibles there, we are reading on page 858. As I say, we are starting a new series for the next few weeks, which I'm calling Preparing the Way of the Lord.

Now, Luke in his Gospel, as you know, in chapters 1 and 2, lingers over the birth of Jesus and the associated events. He also lingers in a way the other Gospels don't do in the same way, or the way that Jesus was introduced to his public ministry.

And we're going to be looking at these events that led up to Jesus coming publicly onto the stage, and indeed to the first of the times when he appeared in public.

And we're going to begin in Luke chapter 3, reading verses 1. We're going to read verse 1 to 17, actually. Luke chapter 3, verse 1.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip, tetrarch of the region of Aecheria 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.

[1 : 28] And John 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 path 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.

John 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.

And the crowds asked him, What then shall we do? And he answered them, Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.

[2 : 50] Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, Teacher, what shall we do? And he said to them, Collect no more than you are authorized to do. Soldiers also asked him, And we, what shall we do?

And he said to them, Do not extort money from anyone by threat or by false accusation, and be content with your wages. As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all saying, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. In the 19th century, a music critic wrote of a musician, This man has no ear for music.

His melodies are harsh and unattractive. We'll never hear of him again. Musician's name was Beethoven.

[4 : 21] The critic has been long forgotten. In the early years of the 20th century, a gangling, awkward-looking youth in a school in Switzerland was told by his teacher, You'd better go and get a job because you will never make anything of school.

The boy's name was Albert Einstein. History has not preserved for us the name of his teacher. And so it is here in Luke chapter 3.

You've got the roll call of the good and the great, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Enos and Caiaphas, and they are all marginalized, completely passed over, and the word of God comes to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness, in the desert.

Can you imagine a bigger putting in place than that? God bypasses the whole establishment, the whole establishment of religion, of politics, of civil authority.

They were the authorities in the land, but John comes with a higher authority, like the Old Testament prophets, like Elijah, like Isaiah, like Jeremiah, the kind of people who had spoken to kings, who had challenged kings and challenged authority.

[5 : 41] Because the time of obscurity is over. Luke is determined that we are going to know who this person John is pointing to is.

And chapters 3 and 4, as I say, are about preparing the way of the Lord, and here he is identified by John. That's our title today. As Jesus comes onto the public stage, he is identified by John.

This is the one who is coming after me, and he is mightier than me. And not only is the message startling, the messenger is startling as well.

He looked and sounded like someone from an older world, like one of the old prophets. But if he looked like yesterday, he spoke like tomorrow, and he overturned the expectations of those who hurt him.

Let's think about this for a few moments. John's startling message about this one who is to come. The first thing to notice is, John preached in the wrong place, in the desert, in the wilderness.

[6 : 53] Why not the temple? That's the kind of place you go to if you're going to preach. Why not go where the crowds are? Why not go to the marketplace? No, he goes to the desert.

You see, he doesn't preach in the temple, because in a few decades, the temple would be gone. And he is preaching about the true temple, the one who is to come, the one who is the temple, if you like, made flesh.

And the desert is often, in the Bible, a place where people met God. Israel met God in the desert. Moses met God in the desert. There's also the desert of unbelief and sinfulness.

And John is saying, first of all, this is fulfillment of prophecy. It wasn't just that John decided, oh, let's go to the desert. No one goes there. I'll go and I'll start a desert ministry, so to speak.

John realizes that he is the one about whom the prophet spoke, the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

[8 : 00] John realized that was his mission, that was his message. He is to prepare the way of the Lord. And thus, the person he identifies is none other than the Lord himself.

Now, when these words were originally spoken 800 years before by the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah is talking about the people returning from Babylon, returning from exile.

And Isaiah says, this is like the greatest event in Israel's history, the exodus, when the people of God were taken out of Egypt. This is a new exodus. So here is an even greater exodus, the exodus of the one who is greater than Moses, who is going to lead his people across the waters of death.

It's very interesting, later on in Luke, in Luke chapter 9, when Luke, when Jesus meets Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, Luke says they talked about his exodus that he was to carry out at Jerusalem.

See what John is saying? John is saying, this is somebody who is breaking into time and space.

You want to understand him. You've got to look at the old prophets. You've got to read what Isaiah and the other prophets said.

[9 : 15] And the other thing John says in this wrong place is this is a message about transformation. When the Lord comes, everything changes. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain hill be made low, and the crooked shall become straight.

Eighteen years or so before, in fact, thirty years, I beg your pardon, before this, Mary, the mother of Jesus, had sung a similar song, the song that we call the Magnificat, which has said exactly these things.

He will put down the mighty from their seats and exalt the humble. And all flesh, says John, verse six, shall see the salvation of God, picking up what Luke has already said, reporting what the angel has said, to you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

But barriers have to be removed. You see, the danger of going to the temple is people imagined that they were pleasing God already. There were no barriers to his presence.

But for the desert to blossom as the rose, as Isaiah prophesied as well, there needed to be transformation. So John speaks in what appears to be the wrong place, but he does it because he knows that is the place where people are going to hear this transforming message.

[10:39] Second thing he gets wrong is he speaks to the wrong people. Verse seven, he said to the crowds, after all, he ought to have been going talking to the Annuses and Caiaphas, the high priest and the establishment leaders.

Surely that's where he ought to have gone. That's where the influential people were. If he could win them, he could win the nation. But John knows far better than that.

John knows that these are the people who are most opposed to his message. And John isn't exactly one given to friendly soundbites, is he?

You brood of vipers. Verse seven. John doesn't say, come and we'll have, we'll have a series of discussions in a non-threatening environment. John says, you brood of vipers, who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Mind you, you probably have to be John the Baptist to get away with saying this, but he's just imagining in the desert when brush fires break out, the snakes flee from their holes.

[11:45] And apparently, this was a popular song of the time about broods of vipers. So one of the commentators says, I don't know how he knows it, but this one of the commentators knows far more about look than anyone has any right to know.

These, John wants the people to recognize what they are. They actually belong to the serpent, to the devil himself, if they turn their back on the message.

So you see, it's not just, it's not a sort of gratuitous insult. It's getting right to the heart of the matter. But what's worse, not only does he speak to the wrong people, he singles out two particular groups, neither of whom seem the kind of recruits you want to prepare the way of the Lord.

the tax collectors. Now, I hope there's nobody here from the Inland Revenue, but tax collectors have never been popular in any generation, have they?

Any of you who have tried to get through to someone in Central One in East Goldbride will know that they're always at lunch or they're on holiday. They want to get in touch with you, of course.

[12:55] It's a different story. They never have any difficulty in that. Tax collectors are never popular. Their taxation is never popular. They're even less popular than that at this time.

They are agents of the occupying Roman power. They are much more like the kind of people we call loan sharks, people who bullied and intimidated people.

And one of them, of course, is to be wonderfully converted in chapter 19, Zacchaeus, the tax collector. He is one of those who are going to be converted.

Now, notice what John says. John doesn't say you've got to give up your job. You can't possibly do this job. He says, he says, he says, collect, verse 13, collect no more than you're authorized to do. Go back to your job and do it honorably for your business practice. That's what he's saying. I think this is important. I mean, people, very often, people, when they're first converted, feel they've got to leave their jobs and do something Christian.

[14:01] We need Christian people in all kinds of jobs and all in secular society. The important thing is that Christians do the job honorably, do it honestly, and for the benefit of society.

The other group are soldiers. Now, once again, remember, they're the occupying soldiers of the Roman army. They're not the kind of, they're not, as you were, if you like, the Jews' own lads and so on.

This is the occupying Roman army. And also, you've not to bully and to intimidate. He says, verse 14, he said to them, do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation.

Don't bully, don't intimidate, don't be greedy, be content with your wages. In other words, look to help, look to be compassionate.

So he preaches to the wrong people. But the point is, we are all the wrong people, aren't we? While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

[15:10] Whether you happen to be a tax collector or a soldier is in a sense irrelevant. The point is, we are all the wrong people who need change. And notice verse 8, he says, don't say we have Abraham as our father.

Faith is not a matter of inheritance. You're not born a Christian, even if you come from a Christian background. So don't brag about your inheritance.

That guarantees nothing. It's a change of heart. So as he prepares the way of the Lord, John preaches in the wrong place. He preaches to the wrong people.

And worse still, he preaches the wrong message. It's a message of radical repentance. He says exactly the things that people don't want to hear.

There's no attempt to water it down. There's no attempt to say, you're actually doing rather well. Just keep on doing what you're doing. He preaches repentance.

[16:12] Verse 7 again, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? bear fruits in keeping with repentance. But above all, he promises of the greater one to come.

Verse 15, I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Now, of course, that leads to speculation. Verse 15, questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the long-promised Messiah. Now, notice, John does not give the message that people wanted.

He doesn't say, one is coming after me who is going to overthrow the Romans and is going to sit on David's throne in Jerusalem and everything will be wonderful.

That's the mistake that so many people were making. They were looking for a political Messiah. It is interesting, even after Jesus died and rose again and before he ascended to heaven, his followers said, Lord, are you now going to restore the kingdom to Israel?

[17:31] Now, what Jesus says, he doesn't actually say you're talking nonsense. What Jesus said is actually it's much, much, much bigger than that. The Holy Spirit is going to come and you are going to take this message not just about the Jewish Messiah, you are going to take this message to everywhere, Judea, Jerusalem, Samaria, and the far parts of the earth.

Well, the kingdom is going to be restored to the Israel of God, but it's far, far bigger. It's not a political thing, it's something that transcends polity. See, it's a supernatural message, says John. Verse, at the end of verse 16, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Now, that's not two things. John isn't saying he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit and he'll also baptize you with fire. He's saying he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit who is the fire of God himself because fire is always the symbol of God's presence, the symbol of the God's presence which purifies and which burns up the dross.

He's going to come, his winnowing fork is in his hand and this, of course, he is going to describe later on in his second book on the day of Pentecost because one of the signs of the Spirit was tongues of fire that filled the place where Jesus' followers were.

[18:54] And the second thing that John the Baptist says in his message is this coming points to the end of the age. His winnowing fork is in his hand, verse 17, to gather the wheat into his barn.

The harvest in Scripture is a symbol of the last day when the harvest of the earth is reaped and when the difference between the wheat and the chaff becomes obvious.

Way back in Psalm 1, Psalmist has said has talked about the righteous as those who grow and flourish and the wicked, that's to say those who don't believe in him as like chaff that disappears.

So you see, this wrong message is in fact a life-changing message. We don't know what they were coming out to listen to. They're probably, they're expecting a Messiah.

It's obvious from various parts in the Gospel. There's a kind of Messiah kind of expectation. So is John, is this the Messiah at last? And John says, no, you've got it wrong.

[20:02] You've got it wrong because you think that the Gospel is associated with temples. You've got it wrong because you think it's about good people. It involves tax collectors and soldiers and the unrighteous.

And you've actually got the message wrong. It's not because you are children of Abraham that you will be saved. It's because if you repent, if you change, you will be saved.

So you see, that wrong message in the wrong place to the wrong people is actually the right message in the right place to the right people. And that is the message for today as well.

We need to clear the rubble out of our lives which prevents the coming of the Messiah. We need to recognize we are the wrong people and we need to accept that message which is life-changing.

Amen. Let's pray. And God, our Father, how often we resent that message, the message that tells us that we need to change, the message that tells us about repentance.

[21 : 10] Help us, Lord, as we reflect on this and in weeks to come as we continue to look at the message that you will indeed transform us and that you will make us the kind of people who do not hinder the kingdom but are heralds of its coming.

we ask this in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.