

John the Baptist - Our Guide 'into the way of peace

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[0 : 00] Good, well let's turn to God's Word and Josh is beginning a little series in Luke's Gospel. So if you have a Bible, turn to Luke.

And we have plenty of visitor Bibles just at the side, at the back. If you don't have a Bible with you, please do grab one of those. And we are in Luke chapter 3 this morning.

Luke chapter 3. And we are reading the first 20 verses of this chapter. Luke chapter 3 and beginning verse 1.

In the 15th 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 Etheria, and Traconatesus, and Licinius, 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 path straight.

[1 : 33] 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.

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 : 43] 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 threats, 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, that he who is mightier than I is coming.

The strap of his 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. So with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.

[3 : 52] But Herod the Tetrarch, who had been reproved by him 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.

Well, amen. And may God bless his word to us this morning. We'll do open once again these words that were read for us from Luke chapter 3.

Who is Jesus? What did he come to do?

There's a great deal of confusion in the world, and indeed, even in a professing church, about such questions. We're going to be spending the next six weeks sitting under Luke's gospel preaching, as he sets forth for us the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, and his teaching about sin and sinners.

And Luke gives us crystal clarity and complete certainty as to who Jesus is and what he came to do. But Luke is not merely a teacher or an historian.

[5 : 10] He's a preacher, an evangelist. He's not simply writing to communicate something true. He's writing to bring conviction about things that are true and good.

He's writing with a profound sense of relief and rejoicing at just how monumental the Lord Jesus is. Now, in the first couple of chapters of Luke's gospel, we have his purpose and his introduction, as it were.

He's setting the scene for all that is to come. He's laying out the significance of all that he's writing about. And so first, his purpose in writing, turn back briefly to Luke chapter 1 and look at Luke's opening words.

Chapter 1, verse 3, he's writing an orderly account. He's putting together a very carefully crafted message. Verse 2, he does so relying on eyewitnesses.

His details are real history, but the details are not incidental. This isn't a random set of musings. Remember, it's an orderly account.

[6 : 21] Verse 4, and he's doing so because he wants to bring certainty concerning things that have been taught about Jesus. But notice Luke's particular focus for how he will do this.

Verse 1, he's interested in the things that have been accomplished among us or fulfilled among us. Luke's explanation of Jesus, his evangel, his gospel, is shaped by fulfillment.

Jesus didn't just drop out of thin air. He didn't appear in a vacuum. Luke wants to make clear that Jesus is in a very real way the fulfillment of all that the Old Testament scriptures spoke of.

He is the realization of all prophetic expectation. And so, Luke, verse 3, has followed all things closely for some time past, literally from the top, or perhaps better as the NAV has it, from the beginning.

Luke's account is saturated with the Old Testament and his account even traces Jesus back to the very beginning. his genealogy in chapter 3 goes all the way back to Adam.

[7 : 37] And so, Luke makes clear that Moses and all the prophets and all the Psalms were anticipating Jesus. Well, that's his purpose. But then his introduction, secondly, we see in the rest of chapters 1 to 2, they cover events that deal with the run-up to and the occurrence of Jesus' birth, as well as what happens immediately afterwards.

But Luke also uses these 10 events to set out the key themes that will be found throughout the Gospel. We don't have time this morning to cover these, but let me point out a couple of things that Luke does.

First, beginning here and carrying on throughout the Gospel, Luke sets the events in real history. You can see that in chapter 1, verse 5. He sets the scene with real events, with real rulers, historical places, and people.

But Luke also brings the time and space of history together with the heavenly realms, as angels appear to Zechariah, to Mary, and to the shepherds.

Now, of course, history is usually marked by those who rule. Eras are remembered by their kings. Luke records it like that. We do likewise. The Victorian era.

[8 : 55] Well, Jesus' arrival brings together David's line and throne with the throne of eternity, the throne of heaven. Luke is making that clear all throughout his Gospel.

Luke wants us to see that the Gospel transcends this world and its kingdoms. Jesus is King far above this world. A second thing that he's doing in his introduction, he marks it with various songs of praise, like Zechariah's song in Mary's Magnificat.

And as we've said, Luke isn't just bland historian. Remember, he is writing with a profound sense of relief and rejoicing at just how monumental the Lord Jesus is.

And so the songs aren't simply here because the right response to seeing prophetic expectation realized is to praise and rejoice. Of course, that is the right response.

but they're also here to embed into Luke's readers the rich themes that he's going to be drawing out throughout the Gospel. So take, for example, Mary's Magnificat, a song steeped in the Old Testament halfway through chapter 1.

[10 : 07] It draws very deeply from Hannah's song back in 1 Samuel, a song that rejoices in the miraculous arrival of Samuel the prophet who would anoint King David later on.

And so Luke is putting before us all that Jesus fulfills from the beginning. Jesus is great David's greater son. But we also see in these songs the kinds of things that Jesus would actually do in his ministry here on earth.

So chapter 1 verse 51 and 52. Mary sings, he 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 and exalted those of humble estates.

Well, we can expect to see Jesus bringing some people through the proud and the rulers and lifting some people high, the humble. And we'll see that later this morning.

Well, after Luke's extended introduction in these first two chapters, we find ourselves bumping into John the Baptist. and John signals hope being realized.

[11 : 18] That's our first point this morning. Verses 1 to 6 of chapter 3. John signals hope being realized. John's mission was to prepare the way for the climactic arrival of the long-promised Savior King.

John's arrival from obscurity signaled the impending arrival of salvation and hope into the world. John and Jesus are very tightly bound in the opening four chapters of Luke's Gospel.

Just some examples of this. Both of their parents have an angel appearing to announce their forthcoming and miraculous births. Both John and Jesus have songs sung by a parent that prophesy about their significance.

Both spend time in the wilderness and the Jordan. both are shown to be evidence of Isaiah's prophecy coming to fulfillment and both face violent consequences for their ministries.

So whilst John is but the forerunner they are bound up together and John's significance cannot be separated from Jesus and vice versa.

[12 : 31] John's appearance is the clear signal that God is doing all that he promised. And so look at how he enters the stage of history. Back in chapter 1 verse 80 after Zechariah had prophesied about what John would do we're simply told that John grew up and was in the wilderness until his public appearance to Israel.

And then 3 verse 1 Luke sets the scene with great detail about the movers and shakers of the world to who is who of the establishment starting with the world power.

Verse 1 the power of Rome the mighty Tiberius Caesar then we have his representative in Judea Pontius Pilate Luke sets before us the Roman political rulers then the political rulers of Israel Herod the Tetrarch of Galilee and the other Tetrarchs and then verse 2 he sets before us the religious rulers of Israel the high priest family dynasty of Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas during the days of these esteemed leaders what happened?

What happens? Well the focus zooms in on some backwater wilderness Luke's thrust here isn't towards the Caesars the Herods the high priests of the world no the place of real significance isn't the palaces and the temples the places of the establishment it's the place where the word of God came do you see John is given no title not like the rest of them later on of course Luke refers to John as John the Baptist he has a title then but not here instead he receives the typical designation that the prophets are given Jonah son of Amittai Jeremiah son of Hilkiah Joel son of Petra verse 2 John son of Zechariah here is the first prophet of God to enter the world stage in over 400 years that's the big event friends no matter the rulers and events of the day this world turns upon the word of God that's what Luke makes plain how many kings rose and fell owing to that whether they listen to the prophets of God in their day that's what counts the word of God whether we are conscious of it or not the truth that the Bible makes plain over and over again is that no matter what fills our news feeds no matter what else is happening in the world the word of God being publicly spoken to his people is the most attention grabbing and precious event in any week anywhere in the world no matter what other voices are clamoring for attention kings and leaders will all face a demise but Christ and his word rule eternally and so as John has God's word pressed upon him he sets about his ministry which verse 3 is to preach a baptism of repentance now the significance of John's ministry is explained in verses 4 to 6

Luke quotes from Isaiah the prophet from Isaiah 40 and these words make clear that John is the great preparer for God himself to step into the world John is our guide to the guide to the way of peace notice verse 4 that the voice comes from the wilderness just as John has and the voice is crying prepare the way prepare the way of the Lord Luke uses that term Lord for God throughout the opening chapters but he also has Elizabeth John's mother referring to baby Jesus as her Lord Luke is making it so very clear that John is here to prepare the way for God himself most of what is quoted in verses 4 to 6 is taken up with the image of preparing the road

[16 : 54] I remember a number of years ago when I was in Uganda we were told about the visit of an American president and so in the midst of all kinds of poverty there was a rather nice hotel and you could tell the route that the president had taken because the road from the airport to this plush hotel and some other significant stops was the straightest smoothest and best road in the entire country their esteemed guest was given due pomp and ceremony for his visit well Isaiah spoke of an esteemed visitor and so a day would come when a straight path is made and the valleys and mountains will be made low and the crooked paths will be straightened and leveled John has come to pave the way for God himself Luke tells us that Isaiah was speaking about John and so about Jesus John isn't simply like the one mentioned in Isaiah's prophecy he is the very person spoken of which means that Jesus himself the Lord

God is stepping into the world now the context of Isaiah 40 is that Isaiah was prophesying about the return of the Lord's people from exile and from enslavement in Babylon and throughout the prophecy of Isaiah he repeatedly draws on the Exodus and Israel's journey through the wilderness into the land of promise he draws on that as a picture of how God would lead his covenant people out of exile and back into the promised land and Isaiah's prophecy was partially fulfilled in history but Isaiah was also speaking in an eschatological sense he was speaking of an ultimate fulfillment of this Isaiah spoke of a day when God would fully and finally deliver his people from bondage to sin and Satan and bring them into God's everlasting kingdom

Isaiah paints the picture of the glorious new creation even saying that he will transform the wilderness into a fruitful luscious Eden like paradise Isaiah prophesies a glorious future where exile will be undone by a second greater exodus that would culminate in a renewed creation and Luke is telling us that John's appearance is the catalyst for the full and final restoration of the Lord's people the full and final salvation of God's covenant people from sin and darkness and Satan to the kingdom of God Luke is declaring that there was wonderful consolation for the Lord's people in the midst of their desolation there was hope in the wilderness a voice arose from the silence God

God is always in the business of fulfilling his promises he is ever faithful to his covenant the event that would change the world was imminent and John's message his preaching called upon his hearers to make a path for the Lord in preparation well what is the straight path Luke tells us secondly that it's repentance John seeks heartfelt repentance verses 7 to 20 John seeks heartfelt repentance the day of God's salvation also speaks of the day of God's judgment John's whole ministry presupposes judgment if the glorious day of the Lord is at hand then both salvation and judgment are at hand John was preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins that's the summary statement of his preaching in verse 3 we have another summary statement in verse 18 his preaching was gospel preaching he was preaching the good news literally evangelizing gospeling his hearers if we turn back to chapter 1

Zechariah's prophecy about what John would do chapter 1 verse 76 and you child shall be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins salvation isn't some sort of vague thing it is salvation from the right and just consequences of sin and rebellion against the good holy and just God and so hanging over John's preaching is the impending judgment of God and indeed hanging over any truly gospel preaching is the impending judgment of God the true preacher is there calling on people to receive forgiveness by means of faith worked out in repentance because there's no other way in fact in Luke's second volume in Acts we read of Peter explaining the unadulterated gospel having been summoned to

[22 : 26] Cornelius' house in Acts 10 Peter begins to explain the good news of peace he begins with the baptism that John proclaimed and he speaks about Jesus' life death and resurrection and says that Jesus commanded the apostles to preach that Jesus is the one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead to him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name that is gospel preaching Jesus is going to judge the living and the dead he was raised for that purpose repent and believe for the forgiveness of sins notice back in chapter 3 verse 7 that Luke makes clear the message behind John's baptism the crowd came out to be baptized but John had the very pointed message in verses 7 to 9

John makes clear the necessity of genuine repentance and he pulls no punches the crowds come to be baptized and John's response is to call them a bunch of snakes I'm told that when brush fire strikes the desert the snakes are there squirm out of little holes to escape from it but notice what John says do not think that you can escape the wrath don't think fleeing like a viper will help it isn't enough to simply want to avoid the wrath to come okay let me tick whatever box I need to tick to avoid the wrath seeking out a means of avoiding genuine repentance will not work is there not a religious right that I can do instead something external rather than actually having to deal with my heart it will ever be the temptation of man to stop short of wholehearted thoroughgoing repentance

John knew that and he has a stinging rebuke for those who want an external sign to mollify their consciences he's making clear don't think that getting my baptism is a substitute for repentance no no look at what John says do not dare say to yourselves that you'll be fine oh this doesn't apply to me he makes clear don't presume upon God based on your religious heritage we have Abraham as our father that's what really counts or perhaps today well we're from the land of the book perhaps I'm an elder a bible study leader I'm an expert in reformed theology indeed I'm truly reformed or I professed faith once long ago doesn't that cover me once saved always saved and all that well listen to Calvin's words none are more stupid than hypocrites who deceive themselves and others by the outward mask of holiness while God thunders on all sides against the whole world they construct a refuge for themselves in their own deceitful fancy for they are convinced that they have nothing to do with the judgment of God no says

John there is only one way of preparation for the Lord Jesus it is bearing fruit that is in keeping with repentance it's the obedience of faith there's no faking it and no substituting it real faith is worked out in repentance John says don't think that my baptism alone will grant forgiveness of sins don't think that your religious pedigree will no says John verse 9 even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees God's judgment will prune even those born of Abraham if they do not bear good fruit look at the end of verse 8 I tell you that God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham oh Israel do not presume upon God's grace bear fruits in keeping with repentance Isaiah 51 pictures

Abraham's descendants as if they were hewn from rock dug from a quarry and he makes clear that it was God he multiplied them and God is ever able to turn hearts of stone to hearts of flesh if Israel wouldn't repent if John's hearers wouldn't repent then the Lord God would raise other people elsewhere indeed Luke back in verse 6 is the only gospel writer to quote Isaiah's words that all flesh shall see the salvation of God God's salvation isn't limited to Israel John is rebuking his hearers those who are aware of the wrath to come and whilst they wish to flee it they wish to remain as snakes in all their wretched snake like appearance an older snake like wretchedness of course we know a snake of all things is not a favorable Bible comparison genuine repentance real faith is seen in actions in moral transformation in a changed life because it's spirit not simply participating in a religious rite is not repentance but

[28 : 18] John goes on to make clear that repentance isn't being super human or even supra human John goes on in verses 10 to 14 to make clear the nature of genuine repentance and repentance is lived out in ordinary everyday ways look at verse 10 when confronted with John's gospel preaching preaching that graciously lays before the people the way into peace preaching that mercifully makes clear that God is not to be trifled with look at what happens three groups of people come asking what then must we do the crowds verse 10 the tax collectors even verse 12 and the soldiers verse 14 when faced with the necessity of repentance what then must we do and look at how down to earth it all is repentance is seen in how we relate with others if you have two tunics says John share them with him who has none likewise with food don't be miserable and miserly with others be generous and open hearted when you are conscious of your need of forgiveness and of the grace that you've received well then look graciously on others verse 13 what does it look like for the tax collectors collect no more taxes than you're authorised to don't be greedy don't be devious have integrity and honesty in your dealings now tax collectors at this time would buy a license of sorts to be able to collect taxes they were in a sense paying up front the tax that room wanted and by doing that they were then authorized to collect taxes on the highways and byways to reuse what they paid and more and sometimes much much more extortion and dishonesty were characteristic of how tax collectors were perceived and so what does repentance look like be honest do what's right collect only what you're authorized to collect verse 14 to the soldiers do not extort money with threats or by false accusations be content with your wages don't be caught up in dodgy dealings with money to top up what you've got isn't it all very down to earth repentance is seen in how we deal with things like our taxes and whether we twist reality or not repentance is seen in how we spend our money in how we give to the

Lord repentance is seen in what we do with our material belongings and in whether people come before possessions repentance means that our wallet is our servant and not our master John is so down to earth repentance can very easily be seen in what we do with our money our credit card invoice that will reveal who and what we love repentance isn't some obscure enigmatic religious practice that's beyond the average person John doesn't say I want you to sell your possessions I want you to take on a new personality I want you to up sticks and move to the mission field or to the monastery he doesn't say go to seminary and learn how to parse Greek he makes clear that repentance is doing what is good and right in all kinds of everyday things in the regular warp and whiff of life of your life right where you are so repentance is not limited to our finances and relationships but

John is giving us to shape the nature of it it's turning from doing what is wrong and seeking to do what is right in everyday life Ralph Davis puts it like this repentance shows up not in some stellar exhibition but in the brown paper package level of life repentance is necessary but it's not beyond us and I think Luke is very carefully making that point by the three groups of people who approach John these verses about those coming to ask John what to do are unique to Luke's gospel and all three instances have connections later on in the gospel so take the crowds what are they to do if they have two tunics they're to share them well what is it that Luke says to the twelve disciples as he sends them out in Luke chapter nine he says don't have two tunics with you or bread why because the sign of whether a town were accepting of

King Jesus was whether they were receptive and hospitable to his disciples and so repentance is seen by receiving apostolic ministry by receiving faithful preaching with an open heart and an open home what about the tax collectors later on well often in the gospels and in Luke Jesus associating with tax collectors as a bone of contention for the religious leaders of the day this man Jesus receives tax collectors and sinners he eats of them and yet we are told here that the tax collectors upon hearing John's gospel message are seeking to genuinely repent and then later on in chapter 19 as Luke comes to the end of the long section of his gospel that deals with following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem and to the cross a section of teaching on what it looks like to walk in Jesus ways right at the end of that section in Luke 19 we bump into a chief tax collector

Zacchaeus and he too repents and welcomes Jesus and there in Luke 19 Luke is doing at least two things we're told that Zacchaeus was small in stature he was low and to see Jesus he climbed up and was asked by Jesus to come down and so he came down Luke more than any other gospel writer uses this kind of direction language up and down and he does so to make the point that Jesus fulfills what Mary sang in the Magnificat remember he has shown strength in his arms he has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and he is exalted and lifted up those of humble estate the chief tax collector was brought down and then lifted up with Jesus saying of

[35 : 21] Zacchaeus today salvation has come to this house since he also was the son of Abraham repentance is the means of being truly exalted and lifted up and friends the truth is that Jesus is patiently and graciously taken up with such as those identified with those who are sinners who repent secondly with the chaos the axe is at the root of the tree we're told and if there is not repentance found it will swing and God will raise up children of the Abraham from these stones or even from tax collectors and chief tax collectors to all to any who come to the Lord Jesus in humble repentance he will lift them up perhaps the soldiers well perhaps that's Luke showing that the scope of Jesus arrival the scope of salvation the salvation of God isn't merely some political revolution the very end of the gospel on the road to Emmaus the disappointment of the disciples that Jesus meets seems to stem from the fact that Jesus died and yet

Rome was not overthrown Jesus salvation is of a far grander scale his isn't to defeat soldiers it's to redeem them and the world his is to defeat Satan and the darkness that imprisons friends repentance is paramount but it's possible and repentance produces peace well as John finishes his teaching there is a whiff of some people thinking that indeed he might actually be the Christ verses 15 and 16 well he isn't he's the forerunner he's there to preach repentance and preparation and commenting on John's lowly posture beside Jesus on him not being able to unstrap even Jesus sandal Ralph Davis says this our culture is so bent on how well you can strut not how quickly you can kneel and likely you need to keep saying to yourself like John

I am not the Messiah five important words for there are people's foibles people's lives and your relatives lives and maybe a few church ministries that you'd like to fix and yourself or someone needs to say that you are not the Messiah prescient words from Ralph Davis John was not the Messiah verse 16 his baptism was a baptism with water but Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire not two different things the same thing fire marks the spirit appearance John's baptism was preparatory Jesus had his own baptism to come he speaks about it later on in Luke chapter 12 Jesus baptism is the baptism of the cross when he is crucified and raised in vindication he will then be the spirit baptizer the life giving spirit that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15 and so

John is saying that what his baptism points to is all fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus but remember Jesus is raised as life giving spirit and judge and so whilst John can graciously warn people to repent well verse 17 it is Jesus who really will separate and divide his winnowing fork is in his hand to separate out those who bear fruit in keeping with repentance and those who will be like the chaff burned with unquenchable fire repentance is paramount but with our gracious savior it is possible the gospel message is the message that Jesus is king that his salvation and judgment loom large and John and every true gospel preacher beckon their hearers to turn to the Lord Jesus they say bear fruit in keeping with repentance turn to him and trust him and so verse 18 with many other exhortations

John preached such good news to the people but Luke includes one last incident for edification John ends up in prison the message of repentance to this world is a divisive message John wasn't invited to give thanks at herod's black tie events he wasn't made archbishop of herod's church of israel no he's thrown in prison the bible doesn't vary reality in the footnotes but perhaps more pointedly here Luke shows us three groups responding to John's preaching with repentance and then he shows us the one who wouldn't repent the one who went out of his way to close his ears to such a message and so perhaps Luke is finishing this account by not only saying that repentance is necessary but also that it needs to be now do not delay listen to one scholar's chastening words herod not only refused to repent he decided to silence

[41 : 06] John so he shut him up in prison that was tantamount to closing the door on the visitor even before he arrived one day so Luke will eventually tell us herod got the chance so he thought to satisfy his curiosity and ask the visitor ask the Lord Jesus many questions but the visitor stayed silent John's message was that the seagre king the son of god was on his way glorious salvation was coming but don't refuse him or reject him for he comes with fire and fork and you child will be called the prophet of the most high for you will go before the lord to prepare his ways to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins and so

John's message to us is bear fruit in keeping with repentance let's pray gracious father how we thank you for the wonder of your grace in the gospel that you graciously warn us and we ask that you would be with us now that we would not scorn your word or refuse it or put off listening to it grant us your sustaining grace so that the shape of our lives would always be one of repentance so that we would be numbered with the humble whom you exalt help us in this we ask for we pray in Jesus name Amen Amen