

Prepare the Way for the Lord

Luke 3:1-38

Key Verse: 3:3

"He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

In today's passage Luke tells us how God sent and used John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus to begin his public ministry. We must know that before Jesus' glorious and life-giving work, there was John's ministry to prepare the way. John's ministry was primarily preaching the message of repentance and baptizing those who responded. In order to prepare for the Lord's coming we must repent of our sins. Many people hope for a great spiritual awakening in which they and their family members may be changed into holy saints, and their neighborhood, city and even nation may become like the kingdom of God on earth. But we must know that to experience such great work of God, preparation is necessary. We can prepare for the Lord by repenting our sins. Let's do so as we listen to the word of God today. Then God will be pleased, and will bless us by his grace.

I. John prepares the way with the message of repentance (1-20)

In this part Luke emphasizes that John's baptism of repentance was rooted in the word of God. It is God who initiates a movement of repentance. In these verses we can learn the power source and contents of John's message, and how we must respond to be saved.

First, the word of God came to John in the desert (1-2). Look at verses 1-2. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar--when Pontus Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene--during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert." With these words, Luke roots his gospel in time and space, as factual events of which we can be certain. Tiberius

Caesar ruled the Roman world as the second Caesar after Augustus (A.D. 14-37). Tiberius has been described as "the gloomiest of men" (by Pliny the Elder), and he treated many people harshly. 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). If we think about his evil deeds one by one, we may get sick to our stomachs. These gloomy and evil men perverted justice and oppressed the weak. Consequently, many people became cynical and depressed, and also did evil things. To make matters worse, the high priests had become religious politicians. They loved neither God nor people, but only money and power. The world was dark and evil. Yet, at that time, Christ the Lord was about to begin his ministry.

Though the noisy world paid no attention, God had been working steadily to prepare the way for the Lord. First he sent John into the world through godly parents Zechariah and Elizabeth. When John was born, the angel prophesied that he would go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (1:17). Like Elijah, John lived in desert solitude. He spent many days and nights meditating on the word of God and in prayer, while high priests frantically sought political power. Then "the word of God came to John" (2).

What does the expression "the word of God came" mean? In the Old Testament, God's word came upon prophets when God wanted to use them to reveal his message to kings and their nations. For example, the word of God came to Elijah, directing him to appoint rulers, both political and spiritual (1 Ki 19:15-17), and to judge evil King Ahab, prophesying that dogs would lick up his blood in Samaria. These things happened just as God had said (2 Ki 8-9; 1 Ki 21:19, 22:38). God raises and deposes leaders and moves history by his word. God's message came upon John, as it had the prophets of old. It had been 400 long years since the last prophet, Malachi, proclaimed the word of the Lord. Now, John, the final Old Testament prophet, would preach the message of repentance to usher in the age of the Christ. The real driving force of history is the word of God. The real history makers in the world are pure and devout people of God to whom God gives his word.

William Carey met Christ personally when he accepted the word of God through a devout preacher. After that he studied the Bible sincerely, living purely and poorly. Then Jesus' command to preach the gospel to the whole world came into his heart. At that time, Christian leaders in England believed the world mission command applied only to the original apostles. Once, Carey was publicly rebuked as a "miserable enthusiast" for his missionary zeal. Yet, the more he was disdained, the more the voice of Christ whispered to him to go into all the world. Carey published a book, "Enquiry," sharing the Biblical and historical evidence supporting his belief. He also described the spiritual condition of his contemporary world, and its need for missionaries. Some fellow pastors were moved by his book and supported his journey to India as the first missionary. It sparked the modern missionary movement. England became a great missionary-sending country and a world power nation. Now, however, her situation is different. More than anything she needs to once again to obey the word of God and raise and send missionaries to the world. In the 1960's, God's word to go into all the world came to Dr. Samuel Lee and Mother Barry in Korea. Some church leaders said that Korea was too poor to send missionaries, and that only the rich in America and Canada could do so. But Dr. Lee and Mother Barry obeyed the world mission command by faith. When they moved to America, Dr. John Jun engaged diligently in raising and sending missionaries. The word of God worked powerfully; 1,500 missionaries went out from Korea to 90 nations. History proves that God blesses nations which obey his word by sending out missionaries. This is more important than any political action of our time. Let's pray for our American missionaries and support them wholeheartedly.

Second, John preached repentance and forgiveness (3-6). In these verses we learn mainly the contents and goal of John's preaching. Look at verse 3. "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." John preached repentance and forgiveness. Repentance is a process of turning from sin to God. It begins by renouncing sin on the basis of God's word. Some things may seem okay according to one's own feelings. But if the word of God calls it sin, it must be renounced. One young lady secretly liked a boy. Using her womanly skills, she won his heart

completely. She had no intention of building him up in God; she just wanted to enjoy his attention. She should have realized that this was sin. Instead, she felt happy and victorious. In such a way, our feelings deceive us; we must examine ourselves in light of God's word. Sometimes we think we have nothing to repent. But if we read the Bible prayerfully we can find a right diagnosis of our sins. Recently I began to feel burdened and did not know why. After thinking this and that, I read Deuteronomy 6:5, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart," which diagnosed my half-hearted devotion to the Lord. I cannot but repent. Repentance involves one's whole being and includes godly sorrow. Repentance is not just groaning over the fact that one's sin was exposed. It is realizing that sin has made God sorry, and turning from it decisively, giving one's heart and life to God. When people repented, John proclaimed the promise of God's forgiveness and baptized them in the Jordan River.

The specific word of God which came to John was the word of Isaiah the prophet, which Luke quotes in verses 4-6: "As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: 'A voice of one calling in the desert, "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 mankind will see God's salvation.'"" Here "the Lord" is God's Christ, the promised Messiah. He is coming! John, like forerunners of kings, went before the Lord to announce his arrival. If people were unprepared, they would miss his coming and the salvation that he brings. So we must prepare.

How can we prepare? We must make straight paths for him. Some people have a valley in their hearts. It is a depression that comes from a deficiency of love or self-esteem. Their valley needs to be filled in with the knowledge of God's love and the truth that they are very good in God's sight. Then they can receive the Lord joyfully when he comes. Some people have a mountain in their hearts. It is inordinate pride because of their appearance, achievement, position or something. Since they think they are a little better than others, they feel they lack nothing. They do not recognize their absolute need for the Lord. Their mountain needs to be made low by a bulldozer or dynamite. They need to

deeply accept that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23). Then they can welcome the Lord humbly when he comes. Some people have a crooked heart. They harbor bitterness or a victim's mentality that makes them interpret everything incorrectly. They need to straighten their road by learning thankfulness and a proper sense of humanity. Then they can welcome the Lord. We must know that highway building is hard work. We must keep at it every day and labor to make our hearts ready to receive the Lord. It is worth it. When we repent sincerely, God will save us. Verse 6 says, "And all mankind will see God's salvation."

Third, John helped people repent practically (7-14). Look at verse 7. Many people came to John, traveling a long distance. They were not upset when he told them to repent. They knew he told them the truth that would save their souls. John said to them, "You brood of vipers." He was calling them poisonous baby snakes, offspring of the big snake, Satan. John spoke harshly so they would realize how terrible their sin was. God's wrath was coming because of their sin! (7b) Sin is serious. However, many people do not take sin seriously. To many people, sin is fun or a joke. But sin is more serious than cancer. Sin turns mankind, made to be loving, holy and good as God's children, into children of the devil, full of hatred, deceit and wickedness. The wages of sin is death, God's judgment, and eternal condemnation (Ro 6:23, Heb 9:27; Rev 21:8). We must take sin seriously.

Look at verse 8a. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." The result of genuine and persistent repentance is spiritual fruit. This fruit is a changed inner character which is ennobled in the image of God: the cold-hearted becomes loving, the habitually grumpy becomes joyful, the restless striver becomes peaceful, the hot-tempered becomes patient, the proud becomes humble, the selfish becomes sacrificial, the lazy becomes diligent, the legalistic becomes gracious, and so on. If we are not making steady progress in character development, we are not keeping with repentance. We must also bear fruit as workers in God's vineyard. We must be excellent messengers, Bible teachers, disciple-makers, counsellors, administrators, and so on, who are useful to God in serving the body of Christ. We must be growing in healthy relationships within our families, and with our

coworkers. We must be excellent students and be the most outstanding employees. Those who keep on repenting will be fruitful in every way.

However, sinful men are geniuses in making excuses not to repent. The Israelites claimed that as descendants of Abraham they were exempted from repentance because they had a special relationship with God. Some people think that because their parents repented they don't have to repent. Others think that because God used them in the past, they don't need to repent. Still others think that as leaders, they don't need to repent. John said, "Do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father" (8b). There is no excuse. When God's word calls us to repent, we must repent. Period. What happens to those who do not produce good fruit? Look at verse 9. "The axe 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."

When John's listeners heard this, they were cut to the heart. They asked, "What should we do then?" They knew they had to deal with their sin problem and they were ready to listen to John. With a shepherd's heart, John helped them to repent practically and in detail. Those who were hiding food in secret places and gaining weight day by day should share with the skinny and hungry people around them. Those who bought two pairs of Gucci designer shoes should give one pair to people without shoes, whose feet were bruised and bleeding. Tax collectors and soldiers should not take advantage of their positions to exploit the helpless, but deal fairly and honestly and be a blessing to others. We must repent practically.

Fourth, John's message pointed to Christ (15-20). At that time, many people were coming to John and wondering if he were the Christ. As a human being, John was vulnerable to the temptation to share Christ's glory. However, John used the opportunity to proclaim the greatness of Christ. Look at verse 16. "John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.'" Christ is superior to John in the nature of his work, and in the nature of his being.

John explains Christ's superiority in works by comparing their baptisms. John's water baptism is important, for those who receive it are prepared to receive the Lord (Lk 7:29-30). However, it is far less powerful than the baptism that Christ gives. Water baptism was a sign of repentance and a public confession to begin a new life. But it did not change a person's inner nature. Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has power to transform our inner being by putting to death the sinful nature and creating a new nature like Christ's (Ro 6:4). In Acts 19 we find some men who had received John's baptism only. They were sincere, but they looked burdened and gloomy all the time. Something was wrong with them. So Paul asked, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." Then Paul told them to believe in Jesus. When he placed his hands on them, they received the Holy Spirit. They began to speak in tongues and prophecy with joy. They became dynamic spiritual leaders who brought the gospel to all Asia Minor.

John explains Christ's superiority in nature by using the image of a slave and his master. John said he was not worthy to untie Christ's sandals, the duty of the lowest slave in a household. John said this because he knew who Christ really is. Christ is the Son of God and in very nature God. On the other hand, John is was a mere human being, and a sinner. As God, Christ is the Judge of all mankind. He separates the fruitful from the barren. He blessed the fruitful with eternal life but burns the barren in the fire.

John's message of repentance and forgiveness, pointing toward Christ was good news for those who believe (18). However, for those who rejected it, it was not good news. John rebuked Herod the tetrach for taking his brother's wife. This was a bad influence to the moral and spiritual life of Israel. According to the historian Josephus, it also led to a bitter military conflict between Herod and Philip which damaged many innocent people. John boldly rebuked Herod to repent. But Herod did not repent. Instead, he locked John up in prison. Finally, John was martyred at the hand of Herod. John carried out his mission of preparing the way for the Lord by giving his life. Jesus praised John highly, saying that there was no one greater among those born of women. We must carry out John's ministry

to prepare the way for the Lord in our times. Lord, grant us to challenge this sinsick generation with the message of repentance and forgiveness.

II. Jesus was baptized by John and received the Holy Spirit (21-38)

This part is the inauguration of Christ in his earthly ministry. Look at verse 21a. "When all the people were baptized, Jesus was baptized too." Jesus is the sinless one. Why was he baptized? It was not for repentance. It was to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15). Jesus took upon himself the burden of sin of his people; Jesus identified with them in their misery. Even more, Jesus decided to go to the cross and shed his blood and die to save them. Another reason Jesus was baptized was to acknowledge the work of God through John and step into God's history humbly.

When Jesus was baptized something fantastic happened. Look at verses 21b-22a. "And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove." The Holy Spirit came upon Jesus to anoint him as the Christ to begin his earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit came in bodily form like a dove. In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit is referred to as the Spirit of the Lord. The Spirit of the Lord anointed special people, such as kings and prophets and priests for the mission God had given them. But his coming was marked by conquering power and was often warlike. The Spirit of the Lord enabled men like Samson, Saul and David to destroy their enemies. But here the Holy Spirit is coming like a dove, the symbol of peace. The Holy Spirit could rest on Jesus in peace because Jesus is without sin. Jesus' ministry was a ministry of peace. Jesus' ministry would bring peace on earth through healing, restoration and reconciliation.

In addition to the Holy Spirit descending, God's own voice spoke to Jesus from heaven, saying in verse 22b, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." God's word of love was poured into Jesus' heart. God's good pleasure was expressed to Jesus. This testimony of God's word gave Jesus inner strength and a clear identity. This would sustain Jesus through the trials and tribulations of his messianic ministry.

In verses 23-38 Luke gives Jesus' genealogy. Unlike Matthew, who traces Jesus' genealogy back to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel, Luke traces Jesus' genealogy back to Adam the first man, and to God. Luke sees Jesus as the representative man for all people on earth.

Today we learned that we must prepare to receive the Lord through repentance. We must also share the message of repentance with the people of our time. May the Lord use us to prepare his way and bring his salvation through all peoples.