

Preparing for Jesus

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Date: 15 January 2017

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[0 : 00] Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low. The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken. A voice says, Cry. And I said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows on it. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

[1 : 18] Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news.

Lift it up, fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, Behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him.

Behold, his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms.

He will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young. 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 Ituria and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, the tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priest of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

And he went into the region around Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it's written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

[2 : 52] 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 to share with him, who has none, and whoever has food, is to do likewise.

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.

[4 : 11] 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 filled with 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. So, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people.

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.

[5 : 20] Well, our key verse this morning is verse 3. If you'll look at Luke 3, verse 3. Speaking of John the Baptist, he went into all the region around the Jordan, the River Jordan, that is, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Luke's subject is repentance. Repentance meaning a real change of mind that brings about a radical change of direction that turns back to God.

It is the language of the U-turn. So, picture the scene. You're driving the car. You're driving to your intended destination. You turn off the motorway, at which point you are glad that you looked at the map beforehand.

Silence gradually descends on the other passengers. Eventually, someone asks, are you sure we're going the right way? At which point, you are completely sure repentance is not even on the agenda.

Several miles later, another voice says, I've checked the sat-nav. Are you still sure you're going the right way? Well, at which point, I guess you're finally persuaded that you are wrong.

[6 : 34] But even then, it is, of course, only when you finally execute the U-turn that you have repented of going in the wrong direction. Any similarity with real events in our family is completely coincidental.

Repentance, a real change of mind, bringing about a radical change of direction, turning back to God. So, let me ask the question of you, which I've been asking this week myself, which is, what part does repentance play in your Christianity?

What part does repentance play in your Christianity? Because, of course, as soon as we hear the word repentance, then we are feeling uneasy, aren't we? We live in a culture which can barely even manage the simple apology, not, I'm sorry, but, I'm sorry I hurt your feelings, which really means, of course, don't be so thin-skinned.

A culture that is quick to see ourselves as victims and to pass the blame onto others. A culture where, from a young age, the self-esteem movement tells us we are wonderful, and if I'm wonderful, then why should I repent of anything?

Well, that is in our culture, but what about in our Christianity? For those who aren't looking in on the Christian faith this morning, and if that is you, we are delighted that you are here. Jesus calls us, yes, to trust him, to follow him, to believe in him, but he also calls us to repent.

[8 : 03] For those of us who would regard ourselves as Christians, is your repentance anything more than saying a few words of confession on a Sunday? For those seeking to tell others about Jesus, is repentance part of the message that you are seeking to proclaim and explain to others?

Now, Luke tells us the beginning of his gospel, and we'll know this, that he's writing to give us certainty. That is the reason why the Holy Spirit has inspired the writing of Luke's gospel, and today he wants us to be certain about repentance.

And you'll see, and I put it on the outline there at the back, you'll see there are two headings on the outline. First of all, salvation is here, repentance is necessary. Secondly, judgment is coming, repentance is personal.

So first of all, salvation is here, repentance is necessary. Have a look at verses one and two. 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 Ituria and Trachonitis, and Lysanius tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Luke, as ever, is keen to set the events of the ministry here of John the Baptist, and the ministry later of Jesus Christ himself, in the context of their political and religious times.

[9 : 36] These events belong to the realm of facts and history, not of myth and legend. They didn't happen in some parallel spiritual universe, which is completely unrelated to real life.

And it means, by the way, that we can date Luke chapter 3 to the year 29 AD. But then, have a look at the second half of verse 2.

The word of God came to John the Baptist, son of, sorry, the word of God came to John, the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. The most important thing is not the decisions and policies of the political rulers of the day, but the word of God came to John the Baptist.

Although, of course, he's not so much the Baptist, he is really John the preacher, because preaching is the focus of his ministry. And the significance of that is explained, of his ministry, is explained in verses 4 to 6, with this quote from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament. We had it read earlier, so please keep a finger in Luke and turn back to Isaiah chapter 40. It's a key passage in the book of Isaiah. Hopefully, some of us would have looked at it in our growth groups this past week.

[10:50] Isaiah chapter 40, page 724. Here we are. We are 700 years or so before the birth of Jesus.

And this is God's message through the prophet Isaiah to his people. Isaiah 40, verse 1. Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she is received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain and hill be made low.

The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places are plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah 40 is the hinge of the book. It's the beginning of the second half of the book and it begins with this great proclamation of God's salvation. In the first half of the book we see that God's people are under judgment because of their sin.

[12:03] and now this glorious announcement, hence the word comfort, verse 1, their sin will be pardoned as God provides double, verse 2, for their sins.

That literally means an exact match or an exact payment for their sins God will provide. Indeed, verse 3, God himself will come make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

This reference to filling valleys and leveling mountains, it would have been familiar with Luke's readers in the ancient world because they would construct processional highways whenever a king or a general or someone important came, they would construct a great processional highway for them.

perhaps at school you've had an important visitor or perhaps at work you've had an important visitor, a senior person in the company who has come to visit.

I remember when I was at school we had the queen mother come to visit one year and suddenly the whole place smelled of fresh paint. We all had to have a uniform inspection beforehand.

[13:13] There was no litter anywhere. It was very unusual and even the teachers seemed to put on their best suits for the occasion. Well back in Luke chapter 3 this is exactly where Luke begins his quotation.

God is coming. He's bringing salvation and therefore preparation is needed. Of course it is because in Jesus Christ here is the living God breaking in to history, breaking into his world offering salvation and the forgiveness of sins.

Luke chapter 3 verse 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. Salvation is here. Repentance is necessary.

Now lest we think that this is simply the message of John the Baptist and therefore because it was so long ago we can safely ignore what he says. What I want us to see is that this message of repentance, the need to repent, also lies at the heart of Jesus preaching and indeed lies at the heart of genuine Christian teaching and preaching today.

So we're going to need to do some page turning. So first of all turn on to Luke chapter 5 verse 32. Luke 5 verse 32. Why does Jesus say he has come?

[14:34] I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Luke chapter 13 verse 3.

What does Jesus say? Luke chapter 13 verse 3. No, I tell you but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. flip over Luke chapter 15 verse 7.

Just so I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. End of Luke's gospel Luke chapter 24 page 1067.

What is the message that the risen Jesus commissions his disciples to proclaim? We've been here before in Luke but have a look at verse 45. Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures and said to them thus it is written that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.

And therefore how does the book of Acts start? In Jerusalem, yes. Turn on to Acts chapter 2. Acts chapter 2 page 1097.

[16:02] Here we are on the day of Pentecost. How does the first spirit-inspired sermon finish? Well, we'd expect it to talk about repentance, wouldn't we?

Acts chapter 2 verse 38. Peter said to them, repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. There's no forgiveness without repentance. There is no receiving of the Holy Spirit without repentance. Repentance, not just feeling guilty or turning over a new leaf, but a U-turn, a complete turnaround from living my life my way without God, a complete turnaround to living life God's way instead to receive the forgiveness of sins.

In other words, neither in the preaching of John the Baptist nor the preaching of Jesus Christ nor the preaching of the early church, in none of those is there what we might call cheap grace. J.C. Ryle, the 19th century bishop of Liverpool, asks this question.

Can we say I repent as well as I believe? Can we say I repent as well as I believe?

[17:23] He goes on, if not, let us not delude our minds with the idea that our sins are yet forgiven. Tragically, much of what passes as Christianity in the 21st century has little or no place for repentance.

Perhaps we feel that sounds negative or perhaps we don't want people to feel guilty. Whereas, of course, there is something far worse than feeling guilty and that is being guilty before God and being unaware of it.

Or perhaps it's because some of us were wary of introducing salvation by works. But repentance doesn't contribute to our salvation far from being the kind of drudgery of climbing up a never-ending ladder as often I think repentance is portrayed and thought of.

Actually, it is the key to experiencing the joy of sins forgiven. It's why, of course, the current state of many of our church denominations is so perilous.

Sadly, the Church of England for one seems to be more concerned to fit in with the culture rather than to challenge the culture such that there is neither the warning of judgment which we see here at the lips of John the Baptist nor the call to genuine repentance.

[18:51] And you'll know the particular area in which that is being played out at the moment within the Church of England is that of sexuality and same-sex relationship. But what do we see?

There is no forgiveness without repentance. It's why those who trust the Bible within the Church of England are having to fight on the issue. It's why we can't simply say let's agree to differ because a gospel without repentance is a different gospel.

It is not the Christian message. So salvation is here. Repentance is necessary. Secondly, verses 7 to 20, judgment is coming repentance must be personal.

Now have a look at verse 7 because John the Baptist gives us a great lesson in spiritual clarity as he says who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? And then verse 9 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.

Fire is the way the Lord Jesus himself describes the judgment and hell. Clarity you see about the nature of salvation there is a judgment there is a wrath to come clarity that it's possible both to be lost on that day as well as to be saved on that day.

[20:21] And wonderfully the message of salvation that we see throughout Luke's gospel the message of salvation for the forgiveness of sins which is at the heart of the message of Jesus is the one way to be saved and escaping the judgment but I guess the real surprise of these next few verses is who John is speaking to verse 7 he's speaking to the crowds he's speaking to those who would have regarded themselves historically as part of God's people and he says to them you too need to be baptized now they'd have been familiar with baptism but only for Gentiles only for non-Jews as a way of welcoming them into God's family so to speak recognizing that they who were once spiritual outsiders are now becoming spiritual insiders but shockingly John says to these people with all their religious heritage and upbringing and privileges he says to them they too need to repent they are outsiders with God by nature just as all of us are by nature hence the question you see verse 7 who warned you to flee from the wrath to come

John is saying to them because whoever told you you've got it wrong you're faking it genuine repentance you see is not about empty words or a meaningless prayer it's not simply about giving

intellectual assent to the Christian message it's not simply about vague feelings of remorse or regret or feeling sorry for ourselves unlike that visit of the school mother to our school it's not simply a matter of giving a lick of paint on the outside to make things look smarter externally no it is a complete u-turn that is evidenced by a change of life have a look at verse 8 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

I take it it's the danger of spiritual presumption they rely on their spiritual heritage they feel they have no need to repent they think God needs them that God is glad to have them on his side what the equivalent be today well I guess the presumption that says to itself well I have a moral framework or I'm a spiritual person or I'm Church of England or I come from a Christian home or even perhaps I attend Grace Church Dulwich John's point is don't just talk the talk of repentance walk the walk of repentance perhaps at school there's someone who's great at talking sort of bigging themselves up you know about sport or particular team or whatever it is but actually as soon as they play in the team although they're good at talking the talk they can't walk the walk or perhaps someone at work they're always talking about how good they are at things but actually in practice they can't deliver so what does genuine repentance look like well verse 11

John says to the crowds whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none whoever has food is to do likewise a life of personal generosity and grace to the tax collectors John says verse 13 collect no more than you are authorized to repentance for the tax collectors means a change of business practices integrity honesty openness fair play in verse 14 John says to the soldiers do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages repentance looks like not using your power and authority for your own personal gain be content rather than grabbing yet more notice that John is not a political revolutionary he doesn't say you shouldn't be a tax collector you shouldn't be a soldier but he does say you need to demonstrate genuine repentance in the way which you go about those things but notice also that two of John's replies deal with money an area where it's all too easy to be protective of our own interests and resources the evidence of genuine repentance is a changed life of course it is as we turn away from living life our way as we turn back to God to live his way of course the evidence of genuine repentance is a changed life which means of course that repentance can only ever be on God's terms not on my terms can I say that again repentance can only ever be on God's terms and not on my terms now it seems to me we're going to find that very difficult because so much of life in 2017 is indeed on my terms just think about watching a film on telly so 40 years ago you had to schedule your whole life around when you wanted to watch the film because it is going to be shown on BBC one on

[26 : 15] Thursday evening at 8 o'clock and you had to be in front of your telly then otherwise you wouldn't watch it 30 years ago I guess you could have recorded it and watched it later 20 years ago you could have gone to the video store and rented it whenever you want 10 years ago love film could have delivered it through your letterbox whereas now you just stream it you don't even have to be in your living room you can watch it whenever you like wherever you like on whatever device you like entirely on your own terms but God says you see repentance is not on my terms repentance is on his terms I take it it's why John addresses each of these groups in turn there's no point in the tax collector saying to himself look I don't need to hear all this stuff about repentance because I don't get drunk thereby ignoring the big thing he does need to repent of which is his business practices the genuineness of our repentance you see is not seen in the easy things

I give up it's rather seen in the things which I find it hard to give up in the things which I naturally hold on to whether I repent of those things don't think that because your sins aren't the kind of sins which are perhaps often mentioned in church don't think you have nothing to repent of repentance is personal now John the Baptist of course is just the forerunner have a look at verses 15 and 16 as the people were filled with expectation and all 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 mighty than I is coming the strap of whose sandals are not worthy to untie he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire John well all John can do is to make a person wet that that is to all any human baptism can do but wonderfully the

Lord Jesus accomplishes what water baptism symbolizes Jesus notice verse 16 will do the two things that John couldn't do one he'll give spiritual life to those who repent and believe and two he'll bring fire which I take it given the other references to fire in this chapter I take it is a reference to

God's wrath he'll bring God's wrath on those who don't repent and don't believe so salvation is here says John repentance is necessary judgment is coming says John repentance must be personal so I want to finish by going back to that question which we opened with which is how much is repentance part of your Christianity Jesus coming to history as Lord and judge calling people to repent and to receive the forgiveness of sins it may well be that you've never done that it may be that today is the very first time you've ever been to church it may be that you've been coming to church for years but actually you've never done it in which case will you do it today and repent and to turn around from living life your way to turn around and receive in repentance the forgiveness of sins a wonderful promise the promise of salvation possible because of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ for our sins for those of us who would call ourselves followers of Jesus is repentance part of our daily lives I take it the danger is that we just take the gospel for granted isn't that your danger it's my danger it's the danger isn't it of cheap grace verse eight is the fruit of repentance being demonstrated in your life and for those of us who are seeking to proclaim the Christian message well is repentance part of our proclamation if it is not then we are not preaching the gospel Andy Lyons the mission director of the mission agency cross links known to some of us writes in the latest cross links magazine very strikingly he says this repentance is the response to the gospel we believe and must be part of what we proclaim to others to omit it is to condemn people to hell in other words you see we mustn't fall for the idea that to speak a hard word to someone is unloving parents we know don't we that there are times when actually a hard word to our children is the most loving thing to do stop it don't run into the road that will be said with urgency probably barked at them but it is a loving thing to say the fact is it's often the person who speaks a soft word actually who is unloving and yes there will be those who reject the call to repent for exactly the same reasons as they rejected

John either because verses 7 to 9 they presume they are right with God already or because like Herod they will not repent have a look at verse 19 Herod the tetrarch who had been reproved by him by John that is for Herodias his brother's wife herod had done added this to them all that he locked up John in prison he silences the messenger like the member of the church family who was told in no uncertain terms by a friend that he didn't ever want to hear him talk about Christianity again like the senior partner of the law firm in the city who decided that no longer would they have a sermon at their carol service like the church where the great and the good have decided they will not put up with their vicar anymore because he calls people to repent and to believe and trust in Jesus John the Baptist you see anticipates the fate of Jesus as well of course of showing us the costliness of calling people to repent a cost you and

[32 : 57] I need to be willing to pay if we are to be faithful to proclaiming what Luke reminds us in verse 18 is indeed the good news there's no good news without the call to repent