

Prepare the Way of the Lord

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. You're deluded to believe that God exists.

Well, that's what Richard Dawkins believes. You can pay him and you can pay his publisher your hard-earned dollars to read all about it in his recently published book, *The God Delusion*. You'll find it at the front of all of the major bookstores. What's his assertion? It is irrational to believe in God.

Richard Dawkins, voted by *Prospect* magazine as one of the world's top three intellectuals. So let me ask you, what's God's verdict on *Prospect* magazine's choice? What's God's verdict on Richard Dawkins? The fool says in his heart, there is no God. That's God's verdict.

[1 : 09] You can read it at the beginning of Psalm 14. But fortunately, not all books in Angus and Robinson or Borders, which is a bit of a favourite for Paul on his day off, Dimmicks, not all of the books in these bookstores are so in your face.

And one that caught my eye this week is titled this, *Koshy's Guide to Keeping It Real*. Now, at the eight o'clock service, there weren't many who knew about Koshy.

Let me just see some heads nodding. Koshy? Well, financial journalist who, with Mel, have transformed breakfast TV.

He's a co-host on the Channel 7 Sunrise program, and they have trounced Channel 9's Today show in the ratings. *Koshy's Guide to Keeping It Real*.

I mean, it's a great title, isn't it? I mean, who doesn't want reality in such an uncertain world? And Koshy explains it this way in his introduction.

[2 : 17] He writes, We can come so caught up in day-to-day issues that we don't sit back and look at the big picture.

I mean, it sounds promising, doesn't it? Well, as I then looked at the chapter headings, this is what the contents of the book is. Coupling, that's his section on marriage.

Creating a Financial Windfall. The Road to Wealth. Kids, Teenagers, Empty Nest, Retirement, Divorce, Tax. And the final chapter, Protecting Number One.

This is a well-crafted, readable cookbook. Certainly for egocentric, materialistic, narcissistic Aussies.

But what about that last chapter? I mean, Protecting Number One. I mean, perhaps that's a glimmer of hope. Is Koshy going to climax this book?

[3 : 18] I mean, this is a book about reality. By proclaiming that God's honour, his character, his name must be upheld, must be revered.

Is he going to proclaim that the living God and him alone is the one to be worshipped? I mean, the book is called *A Guide to Keeping It Real*.

Protecting Number One. What do you think? I mean, surely a book about reality. About not missing the big picture.

Surely in such a book, we would find some advice on preparing to meet the Lord. Wouldn't we? I mean, is that reality?

Or a delusion? Well, Dr. Luke, he's not a financial journalist. He's not even a breakfast personality. But he is a very careful historian.

[4 : 21] And in the early chapters of his Gospel, he puts great emphasis on John, John the Baptist, the forerunner. Why might he put such great emphasis on John the Baptist?

Well, if you've got your Bibles there, would you turn with me to Luke's Gospel? And just a couple of verses in the first chapter. You recall those who were with us before Christmas.

We looked in chapter one, that when the angel announced to Zechariah that elderly Elizabeth would conceive and bear a special son, John, the angel described his ministry this way.

Look with me at verse 16. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah, he will go before him to turn the hearts of parents to their children and disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous.

To make ready a people prepared for the Lord. And then after the birth, you recall that Zechariah in that great proclamation of praise says this in verse 76.

[5 : 27] And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways. A people prepared for the Lord.

That is reality. And so as we, this morning, turn to this first part of Luke chapter 3, the focus is actually on a very specific prophecy.

Uttered by the prophet Isaiah about 700 years before. And so look at verse 4. As it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

You see, John tells us how to be prepared to meet the Lord. John the Baptist is the forerunner. The voice.

Friends, this is actually a critical message. This is the big picture. Such a big picture that in fact everything else in life would simply be a sideshow in comparison.

[6 : 36] And so it's no wonder that Luke gives some considerable attention as he starts chapter 3 to where John the Baptist fits in in world history.

See, the Palestinian world into which John ministered was a pretty complex place. The political situation was tense. It was complex. Rome was controlled.

Controlled Palestine. And Tiberius was the emperor. It's 29 AD. Rome's man on the ground is Pontius Pilate. He's a governor or a prefect.

His job was to collect taxes and seek to keep the peace. Sometimes in the Roman Empire, rule was actually shared with regional figures. Regional figures that had developed good relationships with the emperor.

And this actually was the case with the Herodian line. And it goes all the way back to the reign of Julius Caesar. And now a third generation.

[7 : 36] Herod Antipas. One of the three sons of Herod the Great. Ruled Galilee and Perea. AD 29. It's a time that Luke also describes as being during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.

Now, Annas had been the high priest through to AD 15. So prior to this time, we're in AD 29. And then Caiaphas had taken over his son-in-law and had reigned through to 36 AD.

So given that, notice that Luke actually describes it as a singular high priesthood, doesn't he? Singular high priesthood, but two are mentioned.

You see, Luke the historian, he's a stickler for detail. At the time of John the Baptist's ministry, actual religious power was in fact shared.

With Annas exercising great power behind the scenes. And we see that then as the gospel story unfolds. And indeed in the early part of Acts.

[8 : 47] So here's John. It's AD 29. He's out in the wilderness. He's out in the desert. And he's out in the desert. And that's not a surprise to us because back at the end of chapter 1 in verse 80, we read, the child grew and became strong in spirit.

And he was in the wilderness. He was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel. Since his amazing conception in the womb of his elderly mother, Elizabeth.

John has been set aside to be God's announcer. And so we read, look at the end of verse 2. The word of God came to John.

John then quotes from the book of Isaiah, the 40th chapter. What we've just had read to us this morning. And in fact he quotes from the Greek translation of the Old Testament.

So I'd like you to turn with me just back to Isaiah 40, page 581. I want us to consider the context of these verses that John then quotes.

[9 : 56] Because we can be absolutely sure that John just didn't sort of pluck them out of the air.

The word of the living God came to John. So Isaiah, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he sees the Israelites, the nation of Judah.

He sees them prophetically in exile in Babylon. And the prophetic setting is the 6th century. And the people are despondent. Back in Isaiah 39 in verse 6, the prophet Isaiah had warned Hezekiah that

one day the Babylonians would plunder the royal palace and even take some of Hezekiah's sons into captivity.

And then indeed beginning in 597 BC and through to 586, the Babylonians took some of the Jews back, trashed the city and the temple.

The exile was the result of Israel's unfaithfulness and their sin. Yahweh had actually used the Babylonians to punish His covenant people.

And He'd done it in complete accord with His word in Deuteronomy 28. Covenant curses for His people if they're unfaithful.

[11 : 20] Well, those in exile would have suffered great despair. And we see that despair in the book of Lamentations. They would have had sadness, perhaps some with indignation.

Some would have recognised that indeed their predicament was because this was the right judgement of God. Others were perhaps drawn towards Babylonian idolatry.

The nation of Israel needed to trust in God, not in themselves, not in their leaders, not in other nations. So Isaiah writes in chapter 40 as if this Babylonian exile is nearly over.

And through the divine inspiration of God, Isaiah addresses in advance the inevitable questions that would arise being in exile.

Questions like, was Yahweh, was God able to save them? In fact, did God want to save them? And as you read through just this magnificent chapter, the answer to both of those questions is a resounding yes.

[12 : 29] Notice at the beginning of the chapter that Isaiah begins with a word of comfort. So we should ask straight away, what's the basis of this comfort? I mean, has Israel somehow found a way to pull itself up by its bootstraps?

Does Israel somehow save itself? Neither Israel nor any other human agency is the cause for this declaration of comfort.

It's simply the coming of comfort. His breaking into human history. Think about the coming of God. Let me pose this question to you. Given that word of comfort. Is everyone comforted by the coming of God? Look down with me to the end of the chapter, verse 31.

We read that Israel needs to, the text says, wait for the Lord. And that's an expression which conveys the idea of one who's characterized by confident expectation and trust.

[13 : 41] You see, friends, Israel can appropriate God's strength. They can do it by turning, turning to Yahweh in complete dependence on him.

Well, then look at verse 3 of chapter 40. It is the Lord, it is the King who's coming. In fact, in ancient times, the kind of road building which is described in this text was often associated with preparing for the triumphal tour of a conquering king.

Now, the language is clearly metaphorical. So I want you just to wrestle in your mind with this question as we go back to Luke in a moment.

What do you think it means when the text says, make straight in the desert a highway? Make straight in the desert a highway.

Well, what's going to be the result of the Lord's coming? We read that his glory will be revealed. That is, his absolute being will be manifest.

[14 : 52] And Isaiah is certainly describing the return from exile, but he's describing something more than that. He's describing the realization of God's saving purposes for the whole world.

I was interested last week, week before last, to reading the Australian an article by a Melbourne writer, Pamela Bone, who penned this article entitled, Let's have faith in society and keep God out of it.

Now, Pamela aligns herself with a group in Australia which is estimated in this article to comprise about a quarter to a third of our great country who either believe that God does not exist or admit that they don't know.

Let's have faith in society and keep God out of it. So question, will the sovereign ruler, will the creator, will the Lord God Almighty follow Pamela's command?

So the prophet Isaiah declares, and he declares it about two and a half millennia ago, that one day all flesh, that is, the whole world, will recognize that God alone is.

[16 : 16] Well, armed with the context of Isaiah's passage, flick back with me then to Luke's Gospel, Luke chapter 3.

The forerunner of the Messiah, John the Baptist, he's in the wilderness and he's called by God to be his announcer. But in being the announcer, John seeks no light in light.

He doesn't want to be the main attention. In fact, in John chapter 3, John the Baptist says this, he, speaking of Jesus, must increase.

Do you remember the verse? And I must decrease. So here there's this somewhat anonymous voice subsumed under the message, crying out in the wilderness.

John the Baptist is the voice prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, and we read in verse 4, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low and the crooked shall be made straight and the rough ways made smooth and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

[17:31] John the Baptist, the voice, is preparing the way for the Lord. But preparing the way for the Lord, who specifically is John referring to?

And we'll steal a little bit from Tim's message next week by just flicking down to verse 15. As the people were filled with expectation and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, I baptise you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming.

I'm not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. The question is, who can give the Holy Spirit?

The answer is only God. John is the forerunner to Jesus. The one who is divine.

God himself in human flesh. That's who Jesus is. That actually is reality. See, Luke actually wants none of us to be deluded.

[18:52] Friends, Jesus is far more than a great man, fine teacher, prophet. Jesus is the Lord God Almighty.

and Luke records for us John's proclamation. Jesus is God in human flesh. So, if you think about it, it's not surprising, is it, that Dr.

Luke gives such great emphasis in these early chapters to John the Baptist. John tells us who Jesus is, but it's more than that. John tells us how to be prepared to meet the Lord.

So, look again at verse 4. 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 be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

So, I want to give you, then, the best guide to keeping it real. If I was to borrow some of Koshy's terminology, we all will meet the Lord.

[20:09] That's reality, and the question is, are we ready? We must make straight paths. See, John tells us how to get rid of crookedness in our lives.

When I talk about crookedness, I don't mean sort of the traditional Aussie sport nilly of tax cheating. I mean, that's just simply a symptom of a far deeper and more deadly disease.

Each of us have rough ways in our lives, and John tells us how we can be prepared to meet the Lord despite all that has gone on in our lives.

repentance. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We can be forgiven.

It's great news. Our crookedness, our sinfulness can be dealt with. It can be dealt with when we truly repent.

[21:19] Repentance is the message of John the Baptist. In fact, in the parallel account in Matthew's Gospel, we read, in those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

And then, this is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah has spoken, and on with that quotation. That's how John opened his ministry. this is how Jesus also opened his ministry.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. And the New Testament ends in the book of Revelation with the same command by Jesus. Addressing the church of Laodicea, Jesus says this, I reprove and discipline those whom I love.

Be earnest therefore, and do what? Repent. Jesus, after the resurrection and just immediately before his ascension and returning to the right hand of the Father in heaven, he gave these final instructions to his disciples in Luke 24.

These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. Then he opened their minds to

understand the scriptures.

[22 : 45] And he said to them, thus it's written that the Messiah is to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. And that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem.

Friends, each of us invest so much time and a huge amount of effort into a variety of pursuits in our life, don't we? Whether it's family, entertainment, career, retirement plans, the list is seemingly endless.

And Koshy's book, it's my mate Kosh, I mean, it does actually have a great collection of practical advice for lots of day-to-day issues.

But for a book that's titled A Guide to Keeping It Real, Koshy misses the most vital piece of information.

He misses it, in fact, big time. The vital knowledge we need is simply this, how to be prepared to meet the Lord.

[24 : 02] And God throughout all of Scripture, Old and New Testament, gives a very straightforward message. it's just summed up in one word, repent.

That's actually what Richard Dawkins must do. That's actually what each of us must do. John the Baptist is in Palestine, he calls the people to repentance, and then baptises those who confess their sins, and had turned from self to the Lord God.

And God, a merciful God, pardons all who sincerely repent. It is only God who can forgive.

Well, we've spoken a bit about repentance. What does the Bible actually mean by that term repentance? Repentance involves a change, in fact, in the entire person.

If you like, it's a change in our outlook on life. J.B. Phillips will be known to some of you in his translation of the New Testament.

[25 : 24] He captures well the sense of Jesus' words. This is how he describes repent. repentance is much more than just sorrow for sin, although sorrow for sin is clearly included in repentance.

Repentance is more than an intellectual change. It's more than just turning away from evil deeds. repentance is turning in a new direction to the Lord God.

Repentance is also more than just a feeling. It's not just a question of well I think I'll try a little bit harder. See, true repentance actually changes us. When we turn to Jesus Christ, he gives us the Holy Spirit and it is in the power of the Holy Spirit that we're able to live differently.

And as I reflected on these truths this week, the question that came to my mind in my own life and the question I want to leave with each of you is this. Do people around me, do people around you in your life observe that the gospel has and is changing you?

Because it actually should be quite obvious to those around us. Not perfection but ongoing transformation because it's in repentance that we turn to God in grateful obedience.

[27 : 14] The Bible speaks about us bringing forth the fruits of repentance. repentance must actually issue in a changed life.

The Bible also speaks of repentance not only as a work of man, things like repent for the kingdom of God has come near. The Bible also speaks of repentance as a work of God.

For example, in Acts chapter 11 verse 18, we read God has given even to the Gentiles probably most if not all of us the repentance that leads to life.

It's interesting isn't it? The divine author of scripture sees absolutely no contradiction between God's sovereign bestowal, the gift of repentance and human action for us to repent.

The divine author of scripture sees no contradiction and neither should we. I want to finally just make one point on repentance, a point which I think is often overlooked.

[28 : 30] Repentance is a lifelong activity for the Christian. Think about this. When Jesus instructs us, commands us that we deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him, what's he doing?

He's describing what we must do throughout all of our Christian life. When Paul exhorts his readers not to be conformed to the pattern of the world but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, Romans 12, what's Paul doing?

He's speaking of a lifelong challenge. Friends, it is appropriate to see an initial repentance at the beginning of our Christian life and a repentance that continues through our entire Christian life.

The Anglican prayer book with good theology in its first order but also in other places but in its first order communion service reminds us of the need for ongoing repentance but those who would eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord must examine themselves and amend their lives.

They must come with what? A penitent, a repentant heart and steadfast faith and above all they must give thanks to God for his love towards us in Christ Jesus.

[30 : 08] There is indeed a turning from sin to God that begins our Christian life but we mustn't see repentance as simply if you like a single step in the process of salvation.

The Christian life in all of its totality is to be a life of repentance. The Old Testament scriptures they promised that God would come that he would come in human flesh come as our saviour.

That's what was promised he did. John the Baptist announced the arrival of the Lord God the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and the coming of God as the crucified risen glorified son of God is promised in dozens of New Testament texts.

It will happen. We can be absolutely certain. We're certain because God always keeps his word. In fact you would be deluded to think otherwise.

And yes that includes the supposed third smartest person in the whole world Richard Dawkins. So given this certainty are we prepared to meet the Lord?

[31 : 44] To actually meet the living God? It can be. It's not just a matter of well I'm going to try my best. I'm going to make sure I don't hurt others.

I mean that's commendable. God's solution to our sinful predicament his free offer of salvation it's available to all to all who repent of their sin and turn to the Lord Jesus.

So friends make sure this day that that in fact is your personal experience. and if it is then live it out in your daily Christian life with a repentant heart and a steadfast faith.

Amen.