

The Way Back

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[0 : 00] Well, it would be a great help to me if you opened your Bibles to Luke chapter 3 on page 56. Luke chapter 3, and as you do that, you should know that in two weeks' time, Jim Saladin will be ordained a priest by Bishop Don Harvey, and you're invited to come to the Sunday evening service where that great adventure will take place.

What is so remarkable about that is not that Jim should be ordained, which he should, nor by Bishop Harvey.

What's remarkable is the context in which we find ourselves and how thankful to God we are that his purposes move forward in the midst of greatly uncertain circumstances.

Now, context is not just important for Jim Saladin. It's very important to Luke as he introduces us to John the Baptist. And what he does in chapter 3, did you notice as we read through it, is he tells us about two contexts.

And the first context is the context of power and status and politics and money. That list in verses 1 and 2 that we hear every Christmas of seven names, I used to think that Luke included that to help us know the historical accuracy of the dating of John the Baptist to within a few months, but I now think that's not the point at all.

[1 : 29] We know because we've read chapters 1 and 2 that the salvation God is bringing reverses our notions of status and power and success, don't we?

I mean, last week we looked at Jesus, the birth of Jesus, and Luke gives us two signs, the sign of the manger and the sign of the child, both of which overturn the way money, status and power work in our world.

He has cast the mighty from their thrones, exalted the humble and meek. So what Luke does here is he heaps up seven names, one on top of the other, as a kind of a tower of power or an access of weevils.

Just listen to these guys. Tiberius Caesar. Tiberius Caesar was a paranoid and vicious ruler. He deported the Jews from Rome and it is said by the historian Tacitus that when he died, the crowds gathered outside his house and when the man came outside to announce that he had died, they cheered, only to be quickly silenced by the fact that he had revived, only to cheer again when they heard that Caligula had actually strangled him.

True story. And then they chanted in the streets to the Tiber with Tiberius. I don't know how that goes in Latin, but it probably had a ring to it. Who's the next guy?

[2 : 54] Pontius Pilate, who had Jesus. I mean, this is the man who had Jesus killed. And he's made famous every Sunday around the world as Christians confess the creed crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Herod helped Pilate crucify Jesus, arrested John the Baptist, beheaded John the Baptist. Now, at the end of the list is Annas and Caiaphas. These were the guys who brought Jesus to Herod, to Pilate, I'm sorry, to have him executed.

And in the early history of the church, they orchestrated the campaign of terror against the early Christians. You see the context? This is not the context for a happy, successful and comfortable ministry.

Look down at verse 19 and 20. This is how the passage ends. Herod arresting John the Baptist, and we know later he beheads him. It's very tempting in our context to say that Herod lost his head because he preached the Bible truth on sexual morality.

But I'll avoid that, and I'll just say he dared to preach the truth of God unafraid of the audience. That's the first context. And I think it's enough to make our knees tremble.

[4 : 03] But there's a bigger context, a more important context. In the middle of verse 2 we read, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

Doesn't go to the imperial palace in Rome. Doesn't go to the temple in Jerusalem. Goes to this man, way out in the wilderness. Because the deepest and truest context of our lives, brothers and sisters, is not power, status and wealth.

It is the purpose of God. And the word of God always looks fragile and weak compared to the power structures of the contemporary culture. But it is the word of God that brings salvation.

And what is the word that he preaches? Verse 3, he preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And this is so big, and it's so difficult to hear, that we then have this quote from Isaiah in verses 4, 5 and 6.

Now, at the 9 o'clock service, we went back and we covered Isaiah 40 to 66 in about 5 minutes.

And if you want to do that, get the recording.

[5 : 12] I just want to point out to you that this quote which is so familiar, which you've sung three times, heard sung once and has been read once already in church, is about the fact that God is coming.

God is coming. And he's bringing salvation with him. When God redeemed his people from Egypt, they were only half redeemed.

They were still slaves in their hearts. They were freed from the tyranny of Egypt, but they remained captive to their own sinfulness.

They kept on making up their own gods and rejecting God, their redeemer. And Isaiah 40 to 66 comes to God's people after they have been removed from the land again.

And God says, I will come with forgiveness. I will come with forgiveness. I will forgive your sins. And I will bring, and they'll be blotted out, they'll be no more.

[6 : 15] It is a new exodus. It is a new redemption. It is a new creation and a new heavens and a new, he's doing a new thing. And this freedom, this forgiveness that he brings, this release that he brings, how do we receive it?

And that is what the rest of this passage is about. It's very important to know that the Bible keeps on being very concrete with us. The obstacles that we put in the way of God's coming are not literal, physical mountains.

God doesn't have any problem with straight roads or crooked roads. The problems to the coming of God and the great salvation and forgiveness he brings are the obstacles that we erect in our own hearts, the idols that we keep setting up.

And that is why the one response to the forgiveness of sins that is presented here is repentance. Repentance. And as we go through Luke's gospel, this is the way in which God calls on us to respond.

Repentance is John the Baptist's message. Repentance is Jesus' message. And at the end of the gospel, the risen Jesus says, this is to be your message as well, repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[7 : 26] And what John does is he gives us three pictures of repentance. And each of the pictures of repentance is a reversal of a status quo.

So let's look at them together. The first is the reversal of the religious status quo. What do you do when God comes? Well, verses 7 and 8.

He said therefore to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Bear fruits that befit repentance. Don't begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father. I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children of Abraham.

Now, that's preaching. I've never heard a preacher actually call the congregation snakes, but some preachers think those thoughts.

[8 : 24] I don't, but Jim sometimes struggles with these thoughts. He says, you're a den, you're a slither of snakes. And it's not a preacher's trick.

He's dealing with this poisonous habit that we have in our hearts of using religion to avoid God, of using our devotion to hide from spiritual reality.

John's audience are using their religious heritage to avoid repentance. We're children of Abraham. We have an impeccable religious heritage.

We were baptized Anglican, we were confirmed evangelical, and we have a bishop somewhere in their family. And John says, you're not the offspring of Abraham, you are the offspring of the snake. Your addiction to status, your use of money, your love and power of prestige shows the vacuousness of all your religious exercises and who you really belong to. It's pretty devastating, isn't it?

[9 : 26] In the early 1700s, Jonathan Edwards, preacher, saw revival in his preaching. And he wrote extensively about it.

And he said, there's a great deal of pseudo-religious affection. He said, you can have great fervor and say very long prayers.

You can quote huge sections of scripture. You can have the appearance of love and give great charity.

You can sing praise of God and not have a shred of genuine repentance. Because true repentance shows itself in fruit. Change of heart will show itself in a change of life.

Without the change of heart, religious observance is dangerous. It becomes a toxic, empty snake oil. And that is why the symbol of baptism is so alarming.

[10 : 30] John is saying to those who are Jewish, being Jewish is not enough to belong to God. God is coming. God himself is coming, bringing forgiveness. He's going to make a new people.

And you cannot trust your religious status. You need to be completely immersed in the purpose of God. So you see, repentance means a reversal of the religious status quo.

Secondly, in verses 10 to 14, repentance means a reversal of the ethical status quo. Now, in verse 10, there's a moment that every preacher longs for when the crowd responds three times, what should we do?

What should we do? What should we do? I would love it if you would do that every now and again. If not, if it doesn't fit in the liturgy, at least outside when we shake hands. What should I do?

Because you see, if God is coming with salvation and healing, we can't just sit here.

If we're really forgiven, it's going to lead to external changes and it's going to lead to ethical changes. It's going to change the ethical status quo. And it's very interesting, these three little illustrations.

[11 : 43] John says that repentance changes the way you approach your job. It changes the way you think about other people, how you care about others in everyday behaviour.

And he gives three quick illustrations that show the connection between heart and hand. In verse 11, if you just look down at it, it is clear that there are people who are listening to him who have enough wealth to have the luxury of a series of jackets and coats and food.

And John says, the practical mark of the new life of repentance is being generous with what you have. It's a willingness to share what you think belongs to you.

Actually, that's not quite right, is it? It's not the willingness to share that shows repentance. It's whether you actually do share that shows repentance.

It's what we do with our cars and our houses and our money. If you read the papers, they teach us to accumulate wealth and to hoard wealth, sometimes to give to charity so long as we hoard it enough for ourselves and it has taxation advantages.

[12 : 54] John says, the fruit of forgiveness will be genuine generosity then in verse 12, we see there's another group in the crowd who are tax collectors and you know that the taxation system in those days was a kind of institutionalised extortion.

The Romans went to the locals and they said, bid on the taxation, bid on the tax and whoever won the bid would then have the backing of Rome to go and take from his neighbours as much as he wanted to.

What does repentance look like for tax collectors? I think this is very interesting and might be of some interest to those who are working in the finance industry.

John does not say you need to find a new job but he says, work out what repentance means in the day-to-day activity of your job because repentance is not dropping out, it's not suddenly becoming an ascetic.

Repentance means entering more deeply into life with the knowledge, bringing the knowledge of the salvation of God and the coming of God and the forgiveness of sins with you and very simply he tells them, don't rip people off.

[14:10] If you're in a position to do so, don't do it. If you are a repentant person you need to make decisions and take actions in the light of salvation and if you're in the finance industry ask yourself this question, what difference would it make to my decisions and actions if I knew that the real crisis was not the meltdown in the market but the fact that the judgement and salvation of God is coming?

And then we find the last group in verse 14, Roman soldiers. It's a very difficult verse for pacifists.

They say, what should we do? And John says, you've got to stop certain behaviours.

Stop lying, stop extorting, stop robbing people. Instead, repentance means learning to be content with your wages which is absolutely ridiculous unless there's something more important in your life than financial security.

So you see, repentance means a reversal of religious status quo and a reversal of our ethical status quo. And finally, in verses 15 to 17, thirdly, it means a reversal of our spiritual status quo.

These are very familiar words in verse 16. John says, one is coming and he's pointing to Christ.

He's infinitely more mighty, infinitely more powerful.

[15:32] He says, I baptise you externally but the one who is coming, the Lord who is coming, has power to enter your life and enter your heart and to change you internally.

I baptise you with water. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. It's a wonderful picture.

See, when we receive his forgiveness, God enters into, at the very root and depth of our lives and begins to burn and to cleanse and to make us new.

Fire is a very helpful picture. You remember in the Exodus, God presented himself as fire and now as he comes in the new Exodus, he burns with his love and his purity and his righteousness and as he comes to us in fire, we either allow him to enter our lives and to burn the sin from us or we hold on to our sins and burn with it.

John is not preaching guilt and he's not preaching regret. He's saying, God has the power to change your spiritual DNA. He has the power to enter into your life and to help you to see the great beauty of God and to delight in him and he names our sin and he says, you need to take sides against your sin and find the transforming power of the spirit and that God will renovate you.

So, let me conclude. I have three comments to make by way of conclusion. The first is this.

repentance originates with the good news of the gospel.

[17:20] It is the good news of God's coming that comes first. Do you know when the word forgiveness is used here, when John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, the word forgiveness is the word release.

Release. It's the word of the Exodus and the true tyranny, our true bondage is to sin and the new salvation that God is bringing is the promise of true redemption and release.

Because ultimately, the greatest blessing that we can have is not great status, is not endless cash, it's not all the power and privilege the world can offer, but it is being face to face in fellowship with God.

We learnt this last year in the Exodus, didn't we? This is what God wants. He wants to come to us and to be with us. This is what he has made us for. And now the promise of the gospel is that if you receive the forgiveness of sins, his spirit will come with all the power of God and begin to change us inside.

But that is all completely academic, unless you are convinced that God is willing to forgive you and make you new. It's not going to make any difference whatsoever unless you believe that he is willing to come in and change you and to reverse.

[18:44] And you'll never repent until you see that what God is offering is way better than anything this life has to offer. Your repentance is born of the good news that Jesus Christ has come to save.

Secondly, repentance is essential to the gospel. I said earlier that the gospel John the Baptist preaches is a gospel of repentance, that the gospel Jesus preaches and that we preach and believe is a gospel of repentance.

But that's a very different gospel than the gospel that is being taught in many churches today in North America. It is a gospel which has removed repentance.

And instead of repentance, there is an anemic acceptance by God and a tired tolerance. And the love of God only functions to affirm who I am and what I do.

And it doesn't have any power to transform me or to change me by fire. Instead of the Holy Spirit and fire, it says you're just fine, you just need to radically accept yourself.

[19 : 51] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed by Hitler in 1945, called this cheap grace. He says, this is grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner.

It's not the kind of forgiveness that frees us. Cheap grace is grace we bestow on ourselves. It's the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance. It's baptism without discipline.

It's communion without confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship. Grace without the cross. Grace without Jesus Christ. So I say, repentance is an essential part of the gospel.

Without repentance, we have no gospel. And without repentance, we're still enslaved to sin and unforgiven. It's not accepting our status quo. It's overturning us and making us new.

That's the second comment. And the third comment, very simply, is that you must repent. And I must repent. And I wonder, there may be someone I'm speaking to today and you know in your heart you've never truly repented.

[21 : 02] You know you're not forgiven and you don't know the power of the Holy Spirit and fire. And I want to explain very simply that repentance means three things. Firstly, it means acknowledging sin and turning away from every sin.

Not some sin, but every sin and placing your sin on Jesus and asking Him to forgive you. Second, it means going deeper than that and confessing I need a new nature and a new life and asking God to enter your life by His Spirit with fire to set your heart on fire for His glory.

And thirdly, it means bearing fruit, living out that repentance in the concrete ethical decisions which demonstrate that you are sold out for the glory of Christ.

And if that is you, I say to you today, turn and be saved. God says, I've swept away your transgressions like a cloud. I've swept away your sins like the mist.

Return to me for I have redeemed you. And when we return, there is great joy in heaven. So let's bow our heads and pray this prayer.

[22 : 15] Amen. Our Heavenly Father, week by week, we join together and we strengthen one another to repent of our sins and now we acknowledge that we have sinned against you and we turn and we cast our sins upon the Lord Jesus Christ and ask for your forgiveness.

And we acknowledge that we need new hearts. We pray that by your Spirit you would enter and set our hearts on fire. We pray that you would help us to bear fruit that befit repentance.

now Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who desires not the death of sinners but rather that they may turn from their wickedness and live, who has given power and commandment to his ministers to declare and pronounce to his people being penitent the absolution and remission of their sins.

He pardons and absolves and absolves he pardons and absolves all those who truly repent and unfaintedly believe his gospel. Therefore we beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit that those things may please him which we do at this present and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy so that at the last we may come to his eternal joy through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. Please bow your heads or kneel to pray.

[24 : 10] Gracious God thank you for Luke and the gospel he has written.

Thank you for his attention to accurate detail and his great desire to write the truth in love. We thank you that you use humble means to overcome the powerful.

That your son comes with salvation and forgiveness. Thank you for coming to us. May we see our need for repentance with unprecedented clarity.

Lord in your mercy. Father we thank you that we can worship this morning for time and space to hear your word confess our sin sing with joy and be amongst a community who has their foundation in you.

Thank you that you hold all things together our lives our communities our world. Thank you for your love that is personal true and steadfast.

[25 : 29] Lord in your mercy we pray for our world in pain in so many places. We pray for the people of Iran and Iraq and Afghanistan that you would give them safety and wise ways to find lasting peace.

We pray for the people and the government of Pakistan so jarred by last week's bombing. We ask for the end of violence. we pray for humility and a true desire for peace in our world leaders.

Give our Canadian leaders courage to be voices of wisdom intelligence and unity. Lord in your mercy we do ask your mercy upon the upcoming elections here in Canada and in the United States. May truth and justice prevail. May you give us leaders who are prudent and possess the strength to respond to the overwhelming challenges ahead.

Lord in your mercy. We pray for the city of Vancouver. Thank you God for such a beautiful place to live where your creation reminds us of you daily.

[26 : 48] We pray for those in need by joblessness homelessness poor health depression. Show us how to love those in need in ways we haven't even imagined.

And as cold and wet weather arrives may we provide protection in selfless ways. We pray for those among us that we support in ministry in our own congregation.

We pray for Marian Maxwell in Genesis Vancouver as she seeks to love and support those leaving prostitution. For living waters seeking to support those confronting brokenness and for Richard and Don Bates as they prepare to go to Egypt.

And we give you great thanks Lord for the work and the ministry and the care of Ted and Gloria Engels among us and ask your care upon them as they go to Saskatchewan. Lord in your mercy. We pray for our fragile Anglican communion. We pray for the bishops around the world especially for Rowan Williams seeking to lead in exhausting times.

[27 : 57] As we seek to move forward in uncharted paths may all our thinking and planning and hopes be based in our love and in our need for you. May a spirit of humility color all we do and think.

We pray for bishops Greg Venables Don Harvey and Michael Ingham. May their eyes be on you alone. We pray for St. John's Richmond that you will bless and nurture their ministry and give them unity.

Lord in your mercy. Father we do pray for our own congregation facing legal action and unending challenges. May you give us strength and wisdom that is anew every morning.

Be with our trustees guide them and sustain them with your peace. We ask that you would minimize the financial costs of the challenges we are facing. We pray that these challenges would not consume us.

May your Holy Spirit bestow upon us an extravagant reservoir of grace to color our love for one another. May our faith in the reality that it is your church, your endeavor, be very deep.

[29 : 11] Lord, in your mercy. We pray for those in pain and sorrow in all our lives. we need your comfort, wisdom, and healing every day, Lord God.

We pray specifically for those in pain amongst us here. Rowena, Fiona, Marguerite, Ron, Mayran, Janet, Caroline.

And in a moment of silence, we pray for those known specifically to each of us. Be with them, God. Bring them to mind that we might pray for them and care for them throughout the week. Lord, in your mercy. Lord God, amidst these lovely, precious autumn days of sun and lingering light, may we constantly rest and rejoice in your great light, the light of the world that does bring truth and clarity and hope as nothing else does.

May all our days be rooted in you. Amen.