

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

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[0 : 00] Let's turn to the second reading, Luke chapter 3 and verse 15, page 1035.

Luke chapter 3, verse 15. As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning 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. We don't need to go any further than what Jesus said about John the Baptist to realize that he was one of the most important people in the Bible.

[1 : 14] In fact, he is quite simply the greatest, apart from Jesus himself. Jesus said himself, amongst those born of women, there has arisen none greater than John.

So it's not me that's saying that. Jesus himself is saying that there has arisen none greater than John. Now that's some statement about any human being coming from Jesus.

And we could do a lot worse this evening on the basis of that than to focus our attention for a few moments on John and his ministry and his preaching and his uniqueness in the Bible.

I'm quite sure that if John were allowed to comment on what we're doing tonight, he wouldn't want us to do that. He would want us to focus our attention on Jesus because that's who he came to pronounce and to announce and to foretell.

What does he say about him? He says, I must decrease, but Jesus must increase. He says, I'm not even worthy to stoop down and to open his laces.

[2 : 34] So I don't think he would want us. But the reason that we are perfectly entitled to focus on his ministry is because we have a whole chapter given to us in the Bible about that.

And if the Bible is the word of God, and I believe with all my heart that the whole Bible is the word of God, then this chapter is included, including the chapter that tells us about John.

So we have every right. Whether John would want us to or not, we have every right. And it is instructive for us that we have the authority of the Lord himself to spend some time this evening thinking about the words that we find in this chapter.

Now, nothing is known about John's childhood. He wasn't sinless like Jesus. We know that his birth was announced to his father and mother. His father, first of all, didn't believe that God was going to do this.

And God had to chastise him because of that. His mother was a cousin of Mary. So, in fact, John the Baptist himself was a relative. He's a close relative of Jesus Christ.

[3 : 42] But that didn't make him sinless. Just the same way as Mary wasn't sinless. The mother of Jesus, she wasn't sinless. No one else was sinless except Jesus.

And yet, John the Baptist, there's no question at all but that he and his ministry were quite unique. They were set apart. He was set apart for a particular work that was given to him by God to do.

And this became apparent when he reached adulthood and when God took him into the wilderness and sent his word to him. That was the work that he had.

He was an announcer. He was a preacher. He was to take God's word to the people. In other words, if he lived in the Old Testament, we'd call him a prophet. But even his appearance, as far as we're concerned, was quite unique.

It's very unusual. Even compared to the kind of dress that people in those days would wear, his dress was different. He wore a coat of camel's hair and a leather belt round his waist.

[4 : 50] Now, that wasn't to make his life uncomfortable. It was a uniform that prophets wore. You want to go back to the Old Testament, you find that Elijah wore exactly the same type of clothing.

And that identified him as a prophet that was sent to the people of Israel by God. That's the only reason that he wore it, because of the work, the ministry that God had given him to do.

And his food is described, either here or in Matthew, that he ate locusts and wild honey.

There actually is nothing particularly unusual about that. We find it strange to think about anybody who ate locusts, not so much the wild honey.

There's nothing strange about that. But the idea of eating locusts, I'm sure, doesn't appeal to many of us this evening. But in actual fact, if you go to the Middle East, you find that it's actually a delicacy among some people.

[5 : 55] According to a BBC report in 2003, Chef Moshe Basson, who's the founder and owner of the famous Eucalyptus restaurant in Jerusalem, he's a specialist in reviving ancient biblical foods.

And he recommends locusts. He's serving them crunchy. An effect that is best achieved as follows, he says, drop them into boiling broth, clean them off, roll them in a mixture of flour, coriander seeds, garlic and chili powder, then deep fry them.

And he says that they taste something like between chicken schnitzel, toasted sunflower seeds and prawns. And, of course, I mean, it might not seem, but the idea of eating shellfish to some people is not something that appeals to them.

But as far as the Middle Eastern people are concerned, locusts are not only something to be eaten, but they're something to be enjoyed. And so if you get a chance to eat locusts, then give it a go and see what you think.

There's nothing unusual about eating locusts. Apparently they're full of nutrition and apparently they are included amongst foods that were allowable for Jewish people to eat, according to the Levitical laws.

[7 : 10] They were allowable for Jewish people to eat. So there was nothing unlawful about it. I don't want to spend time this evening talking about what John, I think, find it fascinating and we could talk about it all night.

It's not going to do us a huge amount of good talking about either John's appearance as a prophet or his diet. I want to talk about John's preaching, the substance of John's preaching.

There was just something about John. He didn't have to be advertised. There didn't have to be a campaign or posters or adverts saying John would be in a certain place at a certain synagogue at a certain time in Jerusalem.

And you've got to come and hear this person because he's an eloquent speaker and because he has a great command of language and because he's a slick presentation. That's not the way it was.

Quite the reverse. Quite the reverse. He didn't come to where the people were. People went to where he was. Because there was just something inexplicable about him.

[8 : 16] There was something compelling. Something that was so authoritative that you just knew, even although sometimes it hurts you to listen to him.

All you have to do is listen. Read this chapter. You couldn't remain comfortable listening to John the Baptist. You'd be squirming in your seat. You probably wouldn't be sitting at all.

You'd probably be standing listening to him. You would be because there was no area of your life that wasn't where the stones weren't overturned. He had this knack of being able to just know where to look and know where to shine the spotlight.

And yet there was something, there was nothing false about John. There was a simplicity about him. There was a basic genuineness about him in which everyone knew that this was a man of God.

And when they were listening to him, they were actually listening to the voice of God himself. And some of what you read here may not be the kind of things that we would.

[9 : 24] We might not say, I might not say to you, you're a brood of vipers. But I'm not John the Baptist. And while I hope I preach the gospel, I hope I do.

And while I hope what I say is in accordance with what the Bible says, remember that John the Baptist was a prophet. So every word was inspired by God. And so when people felt that they were listening to the voice of God himself, they actually were listening to the voice of God.

Every word that they heard was God's word. And so it wasn't John who was calling them a brood of vipers. It was God who was calling them a brood of vipers.

That's pretty harsh stuff, isn't it? Either that or it's brutally honest. But God is honest. God wants to confront us all tonight in the gospel for what we are.

And so what might appear to be harsh and even insulting is actually God's voice himself, just like the gospel does.

[10 : 34] It searches the places that we don't want to go and that we would rather people didn't see in our hearts. The places that we like to keep hidden from other people and from ourselves and most of all from God.

But you can't do that. The people there were to discover that God knew everything about them. And that was what made John so compelling. Nobody went home and said, oh, I enjoyed that today.

But everyone went home and said, God has spoken to me. And that's what's important. So it's important about listening to the gospel wherever you are. Of course, I'm not saying that we don't enjoy the gospel.

Every one of God's people, we love the gospel. I hope we do. But yet if you, if God wants to say something to you tonight that is uncomfortable, then let him do it.

Don't shy away from when God wants to confront you about your life. Because that's what this chapter is all about. Because the coming of Jesus, and that was the focus of John's preaching, it was on the coming of Jesus.

[11 : 47] In a few days' time, Jesus was going to appear. Can you, again, we're so accustomed to the gospels that sometimes we don't appreciate how momentous this was.

This was, first of all, the fulfillment of everything that the Old Testament had been looking and promising towards. In a few days' time, the people of Israel were going to get to see their Messiah, the Messiah that they knew was going to appear one day, that God had promised in prophecies like Isaiah and the Psalms.

But the danger was, listen to this, the danger was that they were going to miss it. That they were going to be wrapped up so much with their own lives and with their own presuppositions and the way they did things, their own habits and lifestyles, that they were going to miss the coming of the Son of God.

And if they missed His coming, then they would miss the reason for which He came. And they would be forever lost because they would never come to see that this truly was the Messiah, the Son of God Himself.

Can you imagine what it would have been like to have been brought up as a Jewish person and to have been shown and told that one day God's going to send His Messiah and for John the Baptist to tell them it's going to happen in a few days, in a few weeks' time.

[13 : 17] And for them to miss it, it would be awful, wouldn't it? To miss the very thing that you were waiting for. And the reason, the biggest danger was that the focus wasn't on the coming of Jesus.

The focus was all on the wrong things. And that's always what keeps you separate from God. When your focus is on the wrong things.

And when you're concentrating so much on having a great life and making the most of this life and doing the best you can out of this life and being the best you can out of this life for yourself, achieving as much as possible.

When you are spending every day of your life and your obsession is with yourself and what you can do, then you're not going to be listening to what God is saying or what God is thinking.

And that's where the people were. Some of them were Jews. Some of them were Jews. And as such, they were self-satisfied. And they relied on their own Jewishness.

[14 : 22] Look at what he says to them. He says, Do not even think of saying to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. Now, you and I can't really appreciate that.

Because we're not Jewish. Well, the vast majority, unless there are some visitors of Jewish descent, then we can't appreciate that. But we have to remember that the people in those days, they were Jewish people and they had lapsed into this kind of laziness in which they just assumed that because they belonged to the children of Abraham, that somehow everything was going to be okay.

And that at the end of the day, God was going to accept them because of his love for Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. No, says John, it's not like that at all. He says, Do not even 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. And there are many people who take the equivalent view when it comes to church. They say, Because I belong to a church or because I support a church or because I was brought up in church or because I had Christian parents or Christian grandparents, then surely that puts me in a safe position when it comes to being right with God.

It doesn't make it safe at all. You've got it wrong. Your focus is on the wrong thing. Your focus is on what you can do instead of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

[15 : 52] So some of them were self-satisfied. Their eye was on the wrong object. And then, of course, there's this famous statement, You brood of vipers.

What does this mean? It sounds very harsh. Like I say, Verse 7, He said to the crowds, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Now, the people to whom he said that were people called the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

And these were the very ones who plotted to put Jesus to death at the end of his ministry. Now, they were opposed to John. They hated John. Do you know why?

Because they liked to be the celebrity religious men of the day. Remember that the celebrities of those days, the well-known men of those days, were the synagogue rulers, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes.

They were the people everyone looked up to and revered and listened to. But in actual fact, they were hypocrites. And Jesus himself went on to call them hypocrites, leading the people astray.

[16 : 57] Now, when all these crowds of people came out to hear John, they lost their attention. They lost the following of the crowd and they didn't like this. So what they did was they actually went along with the crowd.

But their intention was not to listen to God's word through John. They had already written him off. See, if you want to live for yourself and for your own popularity, and if you're so obsessed with being right as they were, you're not going to listen to God either tonight or any other time until God challenges you by the power of the Spirit.

That's the way these people, their objective was, their aim was to actually win these, they were like vipers, they were like snakes in the desert hiding behind the rocks or the trees waiting to strike.

And what they wanted to do was to win these people over by, for example, they would come alongside them on the way home, they would walk alongside them and say, what do you think of that? And maybe somebody would say, well, I was really convicted by that.

Oh, my word, I just, I've never heard preaching like that, I've never heard that kind of message before. It was like God was speaking to me, my life needs to change.

[18 : 17] And this Sadducee would say to them, well, I think it was a load of rubbish. Don't believe a word of that stuff. Think about it this way, let's think about it in another way.

You don't really want to listen to a guy who lives in the desert, who eats locusts and wild honey. He's a bit of a loner, isn't he? He's a bit of a loser. How do you know he's right?

And that's the way that they would try and win people back and away from the voice of God. Can I tell you something tonight? That once you start listening to the voice of God, you will hear other voices trying to win you back.

Once you're on the road in which you read the Bible and you're listening to the gospel, then it's not an easy road at all. You will have, there will be a dozen voices saying, don't believe that stuff.

Don't believe the Bible. Don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God. Science has disproved the Bible. All kinds of doubts and fears will come creeping into your mind.

[19 : 24] You have to be resistant to that. You have to stick with what you're hearing and you have to believe that this is indeed the Word of God. And so, John was, John was incensed when he saw these men and he knew that they were out to trap people.

And that's the reason why. This is honesty. This is brutal honesty. He said, you are a brood of vipers. All you want to do, you're not really wanting to listen to God at all. All you want to do is to retrieve these people for your own popularity.

Their motives were all wrong. Many of them were selfish. Just like today's 21st century world.

Where the focus is on me, myself, and I. And so, they never thought about anyone else.

didn't give a second thought to anyone else. And so, when the crowd said, what shall we do? He answered them, whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none.

[20 : 33] That wasn't the way to be saved. Sharing with someone will never get you into heaven. But, remember, that what John was doing was preparing the hearts and the minds of the people for the coming of Jesus Christ.

And in order to do so, the people had to take an honest look, perhaps for the first time in their lives, they had to take a brutally honest look at their own lives.

Their own pride and their own selfishness, their own self-centeredness. And they had to come to John and say, I confess that I have lived for years of my life for myself.

I am number one in my life. And that's why they couldn't care less about anyone else. They were satisfied because they were Jews, but in actual fact they weren't real Jewish people at all because God had said in the Old Testament that if you are my people, you have to provide for the needs of others.

And they refused to do that because of their own selfishness. So if they were really going to be prepared for Jesus coming into the world, they had to take a long hard look at themselves.

[21 : 46] Because if you don't, and it's the same tonight, if you don't take a long hard look at yourself in terms of how God sees you, in terms of the honesty with which God confronts you this evening, in which he asks, take a look at you, maybe for the first time in your life, take a look at what you're really like.

then if you don't do that, you hear the gospel and you think, well, I don't need to be saved. I'm okay. Why do I need to be saved?

The tax collectors came to John. Who were the tax collectors? Men like Zacchaeus, who you come to meet in Luke chapter 19. These were Jewish people who had actually sold themselves.

They had come into the service of the Roman authorities and their job was to take taxes from ordinary Jewish people. In actual fact, there was nothing wrong with that as such, except that it was left up to them how much tax to take.

So they could pocket a whole lot of money. In fact, it's quite strange, isn't it, that if you go down this list in Luke chapter 3 and if you look at all the sin that he accuses the people of, a lot of it has to do with selfishness and money, isn't it?

[23 : 15] This is bang up to date. The heart of man doesn't change. A lot of this has to do with money and selfishness. They came to John and they said, what should we do?

And he said, don't collect any more than you're authorized to do. Now, you might be thinking, well, is that how to be saved? Is re-managing my money in such a way as to give to those who are in need and not to be a selfish myself?

Is that what God expects me to do to be saved? No, it isn't. But what it is, is a long, hard look at my motives, my lifestyle, my priorities, where the focus of my attention lies.

and a lot can be said about a person by the way in which he manages his money. And to what extent he spends it on himself.

That's why so much in the Bible is said about money, so much of what Jesus preached is about money. You go home tonight, you go through the Gospels, I challenge you to read what Jesus says, it was quite extraordinary actually, the extent to which Jesus spoke about my soldiers came to John, they too, they were guilty of extortion, money again, trying to get for themselves.

[24 : 47] He says stop doing it. Now, by stopping doing it, were they then to be right with God? No, they weren't. But they were preparing their hearts to hear the most astounding message they were ever going to hear from the lips of the Son of God.

And if they didn't realize why they needed to be saved, then the words of Jesus would fall on deaf ears.

And if you don't realize why you need to be saved, then Jesus' words will fall on your deaf ears. If we refuse to take a long, hard, honest, look in the mirror of God's word.

And so this was the way in which they were to prepare their hearts and their minds for the coming of Jesus Christ. They were to realize that they were sinners in the eyes of God, and that when they realized how corrupt they were, by John exposing this corruption, just like our corruption needs to be, our dishonesty, our cheating, our lying, our pride, our selfishness, it needs to be exposed by God.

And only then will we come to think, well, what can I do to be saved? How can I be forgiven for all this darkness and rottenness that takes place in my heart?

[26 : 19] How can I get away from this? Who's going to save me and deliver me from this? it's only then that we see the only answer lies in the coming of Jesus into the world and the giving of his life at Calvary so that we can be washed and made clean from the guilt of our sin.

And so when the people, they said, they came to him asking, what shall we do? John was able to point with pinpoint accuracy on, at these areas, these secret areas of their lives in which all was not right.

And tonight perhaps the Lord is doing the same to your own heart. Pinpointing, highlighting, identifying, searching, shining his spotlight on those secret recesses of our hearts because it's only when we come to terms with ourselves and our own corruption and our own lostness that we then see why Jesus came into the world and that we run to him for his forgiveness and for the newness of life that he can give us through his mercy and through his grace.

I've spent much more time tonight talking about this part of the passage than what I expected to talk about which was the two baptisms. And perhaps there was a reason for that, perhaps the Lord is speaking to someone this evening, but I just want to close by asking, what were the two baptisms?

Verse 16, John answered them 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.

[28 : 42] The answer, of course, to sin lies in the Christ who was coming, who was just about to appear and who was just about to be baptized by John in his death and in his resurrection.

And look at how John, he encapsulates the life and the ministry of Christ by describing two baptisms that this time Jesus would carry out.

Now John, of course, is John the Baptist. That was his work, to baptize people. But there was one who was coming, Jesus Christ. And John said this, he is going to be a baptizer also, a greater baptizer than I am.

And this is how he's going to do it. He's going to baptize, first of all, with the Holy Spirit. Secondly, he's going to baptize with fire. Now, what are these two baptisms?

Five minutes to try and briefly explain what these two baptisms are. First of all, there was to be the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Now, interestingly, there was little or no knowledge of who or what the Holy Spirit was at that time.

[29 : 52] It's only in the light of the rest of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit comes to our understanding and we come to understand that God is three persons, God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

But at that time, as far as the Jewish people were concerned, God was one God and there was nothing else to it than that. But, nevertheless, as the Bible unfolds, it's clear that the baptism of the Holy Spirit took place after Jesus left this world, on the day of Pentecost, when the disciples were all gathered together in Acts chapter 2 in Jerusalem, in one place, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them.

He was poured out and they were filled with the Spirit. They began to speak in tongues and they began to speak with great power. That was the baptism of the Holy Spirit. When the church, the church in its infancy, when they were empowered by God himself and they were sent out, and from that moment onwards, the church has been filled with the Holy Spirit.

We believe that all of God's church is filled with the Holy Spirit. And so is every believer. Every believer at that moment was filled with the Holy Spirit.

If you're a believer tonight, you have been baptized by the Holy Spirit and you are filled. The Bible tells us to be filled. The Bible tells us to live lives that are filled with God.

[31 : 26] That's a great privilege, a great blessing that there is in being a Christian. But the second baptism was one of fire. What does that mean? The first baptism is easy to explain because it was very clear that that's what took place on the day of Pentecost.

But the second baptism he says he baptized you with fire. Now some people think it's the same thing the day of Pentecost because they say the Holy Spirit is like a fire. Fire very often symbolizes the Holy Spirit as indeed it symbolized the Holy Spirit in Acts chapter 2.

But if you read on, you discover that it's not Pentecost that John is describing at all. Read on, 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. That's a very different scene altogether to the day of Pentecost. And I would like to suggest to you this evening what's being described as what Jesus is still going to do in the future.

He hasn't done it yet. It's describing the day of judgment when Jesus returns once again and as he describes it himself, when the Son of Man returns in glory, Matthew chapter 25, he will gather every nation around him and separate them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.

[32 : 56] and it's not the only time Jesus, these are not my words. It's not very comfortable and neither is it very fashionable and it's certainly not politically correct to talk about God separate.

They're not my words. These are the words of Jesus himself and the many times that he described his coming in the future as one of judgment and separation.

the parable of the net. We just read it, Matthew chapter 13. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers, but threw away the bad.

So it will be. At the end of the age, the angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. These are the words of Jesus. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.

That's only one side of the story. You remember, of course, that the Jesus that will come in the second coming will be the Jesus of judgment, who will come to take his people to himself and who will come to condemn those who are lost and those who have refused to come to him and to trust in him.

[34 : 21] and to follow him and to believe in him as their savior. In other words, what John is saying is this, that all of us here tonight and every person in the world will either be baptized by one or the other.

We are either baptized in the Holy Spirit, in which case we have come to follow Jesus Christ and we have come to shelter in his saving death.

It is atoning death on the cross. Or we will be baptized by fire. It's one or the other.

What's the fire? The fire is God himself. God before whom you and I have to give an account. The Bible says we all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Every one of us will have to give an account of himself to God. And the question on that day will be this, not how intelligent you are, not how successful you've been in this world, not even how nice and kind and generous a person you have been in this world.

[35 : 43] The question will have been this, did you rest in Jesus? Did you believe and trust and give yourself to Jesus?

You see, it's like this. When God tells me I need to be saved, I need to be saved. Whether I like that or not, whether that's an easy message for me to listen to in my pride and in my vanity, I like to think well of myself.

So I don't like anybody coming to me and telling me, you need to be rescued from sin, you need to be washed from your sin, you're a sinner, you're dead in trespasses and sins, but it's God that says that, I've got to listen to it.

You've got to admit that that's logic, isn't it? When God tells you things as they are, you've got to listen to them, whether you like it or not. And when God says the wages of sin is death, when God says the soul that sins it shall die, you've got to listen to it.

Equally, when God says, I have come into the world to save, to seek and to save those who are lost, I want to, I want to, I want to know that Savior.

[37 : 01] I want to have his washing and his forgiveness and his new life. I want to have the gift of God, which is everlasting life.

And for me to ignore the voice of God is the most awful sin that I can think of. Are you ignoring it tonight?

The very voice in which God is calling you, to himself. Please don't ignore it.

Please listen to him. Because God is speaking to you so that you will find life by believing and trusting in him.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Father in heaven, we thank you that there is a savior who tells us the truth about ourselves and who is not afraid to be honest with us.

[38 : 10] And we thank you that the reason he does so is so that we can, by learning about ourselves, we can run to the only place where there is salvation, where there is rescue and forgiveness.

us. And so Lord, we pray that you will speak to us tonight through the words of John the Baptist and through the kind of message which we at first find so strange and yet when we look at it afresh, it describes us the way we are.

Father in heaven, we pray that you will bless this to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.