

# Preparing the Way

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] All right. Are you prepared for Christmas? It's coming. It's next Saturday, in case you haven't figured that out yet.

Are you prepared for Christmas? Usually we think of this question in terms of the cultural and family celebrations and traditions we have. Is the menu set and the food bought? Are the presents purchased, wrapped, or hopefully on their way in shipping?

Is the tree up and decorated? These are the sorts of questions that we often think about. Are we prepared for Christmas? But, you know, as we come to the Scriptures, as we come to the Bible, it asks the same question, are you prepared for Christmas, but with a much more profound focus.

Are you prepared for the first Christmas? Are you prepared for God's work in your life and in the world?

As we come to our text this morning in the book of Luke, and we'll turn there in just a few minutes, but as we look at the Gospel of Luke and the story there of the coming of Jesus, we recognize that for 400 years God had been silent.

[ 1 : 1 6 ] And as we come to the people in the context of the New Testament, were they prepared for Christmas?

Were they prepared for what God was about to do? Were they ready for Him to come and fulfill His promises? And as we think about them, we think about ourselves as well.

For this Christmas, are you prepared for what God wants to do in your life and in our world this Christmas? If you want to turn in your Bible, we're going to look today at Luke chapter 1, verses 57 through 80.

It's on page 804 in the Pew Bible. And as Pastor Nick has mentioned in the past, there's this beautiful structure in the beginning of the book of Luke where there are two announcements.

The announcements of the birth of John the Baptist and then the announcement of the birth of Jesus. And then last week he preached on the coming together of Mary and Elizabeth, these two mothers surprisingly preparing to give birth.

[ 2 : 3 2 ] And then we come to then, as Luke continues, the structure then continues. There are two birth narratives. There's one we'll do right now on the birth of John the Baptist. And then on Christmas Eve, we'll look at the birth of Jesus Himself.

So, as we're looking at these things, one of the things that's important to notice is that as we come to this part, what God has already been doing has been private up to this point.

And now God is making it public. So, let's look at the passage together and read. Book of Luke, chapter 1, verse 57.

Let's read together. Now, the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day, they came to circumcise the child, and they would have named him Zechariah after his father. But his mother answered, No, he shall be called John.

[ 3 : 33 ] And they said to her, None of your relatives are called by that name or by this name. And they made signs to his father inquiring what he wanted him to be called.

And he asked for a writing tablet, and he wrote, His name is John. And they all wondered. And immediately his mouth was opened, and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, Blessing God.

And fear came on all the neighbors. And all these things were talked about through all the hill country of Judea. And all who heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What then will this child be?

For the hand of the Lord was on him, was with him. And the father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, saying, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham to grant us, that we, being delivered from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.

[ 5 : 28 ] And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, this morning as we, during this Advent season, prepare to celebrate your coming to earth, Lord, we pray this morning that your word would speak to us, that your Holy Spirit would take it and would teach our minds the truths, would teach our hearts, Lord, to respond in love and willing submission, Lord, that we would be filled with joy, filled with the joy at what you are up to, the things that we celebrate in Christmas.

Help us, Lord, to have a renewed joy this morning in all these things. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So as we look at this passage, there are two clear parts.

The first half is the narrative. The second half is the words of Zechariah. The first half tells us about the amazing arrival of John the Baptist, and the second part tells us about the amazing role of John the Baptist.

So let's look at these things in order. First, the amazing arrival. You know, it's fun to look at this narrative arc in 57 through 66. One of the most remarkable things is that the birth of the baby is the very, it's the setup.

It's not the point, right? The baby is born in verse 57, and then we move on to how everybody responded and what happened afterwards. So the baby coming, we've already sort of dealt with that at the beginning of chapter one about how amazing that is.

[ 7 : 17 ] So that's not the point of this. What seems to be the main focus of this is what is this baby's name going to be? Because the people assumed that they were going to name it after his father, but both Elizabeth and Zechariah said, no, no, the name will be John.

And interestingly, when you look at the way John, the way Zechariah phrases it in verse 60, it's actually clear in the original. What Zechariah literally said was, John is his name.

It's the first word of what he wrote was, the emphasis is that John, and here's the amazing thing, right? Phil Riken, who's the president of Wheaton College now, and a pastor for many years, wrote a great commentary on Luke.

And he pointed out that the name Zechariah means that God remembers. The name Elizabeth means God is faithful. But John means God is merciful.

And this was the name that Zechariah and Elizabeth gave to their son because it is the name that God had given them through the angel. His name shall be called John.

[ 8 : 27 ] And in response to the agreement of this husband and wife, we don't know all the background. We don't know if this was a supernatural agreement.

We don't know how much communication they had. But clearly, they stood against the will of the people to say, his name is John. God is merciful. And it seems like the way Luke writes this whole story is to point us to the question that the people ask at the very end, which is, what then will this child be?

What role is he going to play? God's done something amazing to bring this baby about from a woman who's too old to have children. What then is God up to in this?

Before we move on, I just want to stop and pause for a second. It's a good question for us to ask. Michelle actually asked us this week. We were talking about, well, lots of things. And she just said, you know, I just wonder, what is God up to in the middle?

We were talking in the middle of trials and challenges that we're facing and different things like that. What is God up to? And it's a good question for us to ask. Look, these last two years have been really hard.

[ 9 : 47 ] They've been challenging for many of us. They've been challenging for all of us in different ways, haven't they? Some of us have experienced isolation, depression, separations, divisions, losses of people or of hopes and dreams.

Some of us have had lots of time with family, and that's been wonderful. Some of us have had lots of time with family, and that's been terrible. Sometimes it feels like it's easy for the darkness to be winning.

And we ask the question, what is God up to? It reminds me of a scene from Lion and Witch in the Wardrobe. You remember the four Pevensy children are brought into this magical world, but it's winter, and it's cold, and they're unprepared.

And as they come back the second time, the four of them, they find Mr. Tumnus is gone, and his house has been destroyed, and they're afraid. And then they meet Mr. Beaver.

And Mr. Beaver says this. They say Aslan is on the move. Maybe he's already here.

[ 11 : 05 ] And now a very strange thing happened. C.S. Lewis goes on. None of the children knew who Aslan was, but the moment the beaver had spoken these words, everyone felt very different.

It was like in a dream when someone says something you don't understand, but in the dream it feels like it is very important. Either it's a terrible thing that turns the whole dream into a nightmare, or else a beautiful one that makes the dream so wonderful that you remember it all your life.

It was like that now. At the name of Aslan, each of the children felt something jump inside of them. Aslan, of course, is an allegory of Jesus.

And in Luke 1, we see something similar. God is on the move, and he's making it known. This miraculous baby has come, and there's a similar response. The people are amazed when they find out, Elizabeth, you're pregnant?

You had a baby! That's unbelievable! And then the way this naming happens, and when Zechariah's mouth is loosed, they were amazed and fearful and filled with awe.

[ 12 : 24 ] What will this amazing arrival be? What will he do? And this is what Luke sets us up with all this question. And then we say, well, what's the answer?

Well, the answer is in the words of his father, right? Because it seems like from verse 67 on, we get Zechariah's words that are referred to in verse 64.

In his blessing God, he would also answer the question, who will this child be, and what will he do? So let's look at that together.

Starting in verse 67, we see Zechariah's mouth opened. We see him loosed to speak after, remember, nine months of silence when he was made mute in judgment for his unbelief at the announcement of the coming of his child.

And when we get to the answer to the question, we actually will get to it in verses 76 and 77. So there are 10 verses before then. Zechariah first begins by saying, I want to praise God, and then I will tell you what the role of my child will be.

[ 13 : 45 ] He begins by blessing God, and he reminds us of what God is up to. He goes back and he pulls in all this imagery from the Old Testament.

He doesn't even seem like he's quoting things, but remember, he's a priest in the temple, and he's just pulling from his knowledge of what he knows God has already done, that God has always been up to being a God who would redeem a people for himself, that he was going to take the initiative, that he would come and visit his people, that he would fulfill what he has spoken, the promises to David to create a kingdom, the promises to Abraham to make a people for himself and to bless them and to make them a blessing to the world.

And if you look through 68 through 75, you see over and over again, the central theme of God's redemptive work, his saving work.

So you see in verse 68, he says, God will redeem his people. Verse 69, God will raise up a horn of salvation. Verse 71, God has saved us from our enemies.

72, that God will show the mercy that he promised. And verse 74, again, that he will deliver us from the hands of our enemies. Before Zechariah gets to talking about his son, he wants to talk about his God and say, this is what God has been up to for all of history.

[ 15 : 19 ] And then he says, and my son is the next step in that process of what God is doing in this world. So look with me in verse 76 and 77 again.

Let's read it. This is what John says. Can you imagine? This is the first words he said in nine months and he gets to speak this blessing over his son. And he says, and you child will be called the prophet of the most high.

For you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins.

After 400 years of silence, God is going to speak again. And here's the prophet. Here's the last Old Testament prophet.

My son will be the last one to speak of the one who is coming to fulfill these promises, to finally do the work that will be the centerpiece of all of history and all of what God will do.

[ 16 : 21 ] God knew that Jesus would need a herald to go before him to prepare the way. And John the Baptist would be it.

I don't know if you guys are Disney fans. We've seen a lot of Disney in our household. And one of my favorite ones is Disney Robin Hood. It's one of the offbeat ones.

It's not as well known, but it's really funny. The Phony King of England is a great song. But one of the things that happens, spoiler alert, at the very end, the real king comes back.

King Richard, whatever he is, I can't even remember. But he shows up and do you remember what happens? He shows up and before him goes this trail of people on horses with horns and they're blaring.

He's here, he's coming. Here comes the king. They go before him to proclaim that the king is about to arrive. And this is what John the Baptist is coming to do in the world.

[ 17 : 30 ] John the Baptist is gonna go out into the wilderness. He's gonna preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That's what it says in Luke 3. That this is what John the Baptist is going to do to say there and he's gonna do that and then he's gonna say, there's one coming behind me, one who is more worthy than I, one who is so worthy I can't even tie his shoes.

There's one coming behind me and he's the one that you're waiting for because he's gonna come and bring the forgiveness of our sins.

Remember that in the context of first century Israel, the nation of Israel, what kind of salvation were they longing for?

What kind of redemption were they looking for? Probably a political and a social one. They're looking for freedom from the yoke of Rome, for a reestablishment of the glory of Israel after years of subjugation.

They were looking for a renewal of a society and a righteous society that Israel and Jerusalem, again, would be a light to the world where all people would come and see the greatness of God because of their sociopolitical situation.

[ 18 : 45 ] But John says, I have a better message than that. I have a greater message for you and that is that this one is gonna come and bring the forgiveness of sins.

And my role is to tell you that with him will come the knowledge of that forgiveness of sin. Now, before we go on, let's think about this for a minute because we don't like to think about sin, certainly not during Christmas.

It's kind of depressing. We think of sinners often culturally as bad people. There are some people who are bad enough we can label them as bad. There's Hitler and there's Bin Laden and that sort of thing.

And then we often have our own pet peeve list of the people who are really sinners in the world, the people who park in handicapped parking spots or who don't recycle their recyclables or who drive a gas guzzling car or who drive an electric Prius or who watch CNN.

We can go across a spectrum and we all have our own sins that we condemn others for. And obviously those are all lighthearted. Let's not get into the details of that.

[ 19 : 59 ] But more deeply we do, there are things that we all think. There are sinful people out there, but they're not typically us. We don't think of ourselves as being sinners very often.

We often think of them as sinners and we excuse ourselves. We know we're not perfect, but aren't we good enough? But the Bible tells a different story, a much darker story, because it tells us that our sin is deep and comprehensive and that the darkness in our hearts has always been there since Adam.

And it shows because we are selfish and proud and self-centered and morally weak. As the book of Romans tells us, there is no one righteous, not one.

We are all sinful. We don't believe God. We don't trust God. We don't serve God. We don't honor Him in our hearts. And this problem of sin then raises a question, how can God have fellowship with darkness and death from sin?

And John the Baptist has come to say, God is on the move to deal with that very question. God is on the move to bring one who will bring the forgiveness of sins to the world once for all.

[ 21 : 27 ] He will come and bring light into the darkness of our sinful world. He will come to bring light into the darkness of our sinful soul. He will make peace with God possible again through the forgiveness of sins.

And He will do this at great cost. For the cross of Christ hangs over the manger, does it not? Jesus will earn forgiveness for us by bearing the punishment of our sins.

Because a just God must rightly and justly condemn all sin, including ours. Yet Jesus comes and He says, if you trust in me, if you believe that what I have done is sufficient, and if you will throw yourself by faith desperately onto what I am about to do, I will bear the punishment for your sin and I will give to you instead forgiveness for your sin.

I will lift your burden. The guilt and the shame will be taken away. I will tear down the barrier so that you can now enter into the household of God and know that He accepts you and He embraces you and He welcomes you.

This is what the forgiveness of sin does for us. And just like in the first century, the religious people sometimes, the religious people like us, sometimes have the hardest time accepting that.

[ 23 : 01 ] Because we don't think we're that bad, so we don't think that we need this very much. And it's those of us who are broken, who know how bad we are, who have a hard time believing that God could ever love us and accept us, who are closer to understanding how amazing this message of forgiveness of sins really is.

John's announcement is that in Jesus there is forgiveness. for the sins of all. This is the story of the book of Luke. If we were going to read through the rest of the book of Luke, we would see the paralytic who could not walk was raised and his sins were forgiven.

We would see a greedy tax collector, Zacchaeus, forgiven and transformed to generosity. We see a woman of the city, probably a prostitute, who is forgiven and welcomed to table fellowship with Jesus.

We see the unworthy gathered and welcomed in the parable of the great feast. We see the prodigal son who had rejected his father, forsaken his family and gone off in selfish living using all of the blessings that he had been given simply for his selfish gain.

Be embraced by the father, being given a robe and a ring and sandals. As God said, come back. The only way that this happens is because of Jesus.

[ 24 : 29 ] Because Jesus came for the forgiveness of our sins. And John the Baptist, when he saw Jesus, he said, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

This is the light that John proclaims. This is the one that he is coming before to prepare the way for a world to prepare the way in our hearts to receive this.

A light that brings forgiveness and peace with God. So friends, what do we do in response to this text? How do we respond to this?

There are two things that we must do this morning. One, prepare our hearts to acknowledge our need and to embrace God's provision.

You know, Advent historically has actually been a season not of joy and celebration but of repentance. In the church calendar, Advent is preparing like Lent is for Easter.

[ 25 : 33 ] A time where we prepare by acknowledging our sin and our need. God's provision and it is as we do this that we see how wonderful, how amazing the gift of Jesus is for us.

And when we see that, then it leads us to the joyful worship, to grateful thanksgiving, and the humble service that God calls us to when we know what we are saved from.

Oh, what great joy it is. So if you've placed your faith in Christ, let the joy of your salvation be renewed this Advent season.

And if you're here this morning and you've never known this forgiveness of sin, you've never acknowledged that this is true of you, but this morning you've seen it or you've seen how great forgiveness would be and you long for it, take it this morning.

Take Christ by faith and know that He has forgiven your sins. And then we can all sing together. Oh, holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.

[ 26 : 49 ] Cast out our sin and enter in. Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell. Oh, come to us, abide with us.

Jesus, our Lord Emmanuel. So friends, the first response is in our own hearts to acknowledge our need and to be renewed in the joy of what it means that Jesus has come.

But like John the Baptist, we also have a role in the world. We have a role in the world to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus into places where He is not yet known, where He is not yet received, where His forgiveness has not yet taken root.

Just as Zechariah's tongue was loosed and he praised God, so too would this be true for us. That this Christmas season, we would prepare the way in the hearts of our friends and our neighbors, our family that we gather with in these holidays.

that we would, by our worshipful lives, by the way that Christ is Lord of all things, and by the verbal testimony that what we celebrate on Christmas is the coming of a Savior who will save us from our sins.

[ 28 : 10 ] John the Baptist came to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus. May we, may our hearts be prepared for the coming of Jesus as well, and may we help those around us to prepare for His coming into their lives as well.

This is what God is up to in the world. Let's pray together. Lord Jesus, we come to you this morning acknowledging, Lord, that you are a wonderful Savior, that you have worked for us forgiveness of sins in an amazing way.

Lord, we thank you that in your redemptive history you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way, to make known who is coming so that you would prepare the world to receive Him.

Lord, we pray this morning that we would receive Him still. Thank you, Lord.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.