

John The Baptist Prepares The Way Of The Lord.

Text: Luke 3:3-14

1) John's call for repentance

Suggested Hymns:

2) John demands the fruits of repentance

2, 13, 6, 320, 12

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 3:3-14, ³ *And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,* ⁴ *as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'* ⁵ *Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth;* ⁶ *And all flesh shall see the salvation of God."*

⁷ *Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"* ⁸ *"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."* ⁹ *"And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."*

¹⁰ *So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?"* ¹¹ *He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."* ¹² *Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"* ¹³ *And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."* ¹⁴ *Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?" So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

What a remarkable man John the Baptist must have been! After years of seclusion in lonely desert regions, God finally called him to begin his appointed work as the forerunner of Christ.

Speaking under divine inspiration, as did the prophets of old, his was a voice such as had not been heard in Israel for centuries. People from all parts of the Holy Land and all walks of life streamed into the wilderness to hear his clear-cut summons to repent and to prepare for the appearance of that “Mighty One” who was to baptise with the Holy Spirit and to execute judgment.

In preoccupation with temporal affairs it may be difficult for us to realise how profoundly John impressed his hearers. Yet if we give ourselves to quiet meditation and prayer, we, too, shall, by God’s grace, be filled with a deep longing to prepare our own hearts for the Lord. This we should be anxious to do. John’s call to repentance is as important for us as it was for men in far-off Israel.

Let us consider the work of Christ’s forerunner. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. John’s Call for Repentance

The Voice in the Wilderness Breaks the Long Silence of Prophecy

Old Testament prophecy had spoken of the coming of two persons to usher in a new era of grace. In Malachi we read, ¹ *“Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight.”*¹

According to this, the greater of the two was to be the Lord Himself, *“the Messenger of the covenant,”* who through His atoning work would make God’s Gospel promises effective. Isaiah referred to Him as *“Immanuel”* and said that He would be called *“Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace”*.²

The second of these persons was to be the “messenger” of this Lord. He was to precede the Lord and prepare men’s hearts to receive Him. In his person and his preaching he was to be like the flaming prophet Elijah.³

The hopes of the faithful in Israel had been nourished by such prophecies during the four hundred years of silence between the Old and the New Testament. But the majority of the people either neglected them or emptied them of their spiritual meaning and used them to bolster their hopes that the Messiah whom they proclaimed would bring them temporal peace and prosperity in the face of their enemies.

At the dawn of the New Testament the remarkable events connected with the birth of these two — John and Jesus — had for a brief period revived the old hopes. But these were dimmed again during the years that both were growing to manhood and awaiting God's hour for their manifestation to the world.

When both were ready for their appointed work, events moved swiftly. Without warning, like the rays of the sun bursting through a gap in the clouds, John the Baptist, in obedience to God's command, raised his compelling voice in the desert to call upon Israelites to *“prepare the way of the Lord.”* Thus was sounded the dawning day of grace.

The New Day of Grace Calls for Repentance

Since all people are sinners in God's sight, there is no grace for them without repentance — a thorough change of heart and mind. John therefore began his activity with the trumpet call, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”*⁴ The sobering effect of this on the people must have been intensified by the surroundings in which they found themselves. For in the desert, withdrawn from their everyday concerns, they could give undivided attention to what John had to tell them of their spiritual condition and needs.

“Repent.” — All who are to be brought into the Kingdom of God must be roused out of their spiritual complacency and indifference. They must be brought to see their inherited sinfulness and estrangement from God. They must see that since they are “born of flesh,” of sinful forebears, they, too, are “flesh,” sinful, hence “children of wrath” and subject to death and damnation.⁵

Again, they must come to the realisation that they daily transgress every Commandment of the Law in thoughts and desires, words and deeds.

A mere intellectual knowledge of this on their part will not do. They must feel and lament their plight and be ready to say with the Apostle in genuine

sorrow, ***“O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”***⁶

John Preached Thorough Repentance

John knew what repentance means and what it requires. His preaching was in accord with what God had foretold about it in the Book of Isaiah.⁷ Our text says, ***“as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. ⁵ Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; ⁶ And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”***

This passage of Isaiah is couched in figurative language, but its general meaning is clear. If the Lord is to come to men, if they are to see His salvation, His path into their hearts must be prepared in advance.

Figuratively speaking, unregenerate hearts are like a wilderness full of obstacles and hindrances to the Lord’s entrance. These must be cleared away so that His path becomes straight and smooth.

“Valleys” must ***“be filled.”*** This may be taken to mean that the spiritual vacuum created by moral and religious indifference must be filled up with fear and love to God and trust in Him, with the worship of Him ***“in spirit and in truth.”***

“Every mountain and hill must be brought low” — arrogance, pride, selfishness, must be removed.

“The crooked” must be made ***“straight”*** — hypocrisy, deceit, and fraud must be eliminated. Finally ***“the rough ways”*** must ***“be made smooth”*** — all sinful desires and evil lusts must be cleared away.

How can this be accomplished? The Scriptural answer is: by repentance! Repentance is no mere superficial and fleeting regret. The striking language which we have just heard strongly emphasises that repentance is rather a deep and honest sorrow for sin, for our lack of conformity with God’s holy Law, and for our active transgressions of it in thought, word, and deed; and this must be coupled with the sincere desire to forsake sin and serve righteousness.

But how can men, who are by nature *“dead in trespasses and sins,”* be prepared in this manner for the Lord’s coming? Only God, the Author of all life, spiritual as well as physical, can accomplish this change. But He has told us how He will bring it about, namely, through His Word and Sacraments.

Through His written and preached Law His Holy Spirit convinces people of their sin and guilt. Through the Gospel of redeeming grace in Christ and through the *“washing of regeneration”* He brings them to faith in His forgiveness, raises their crushed spirits, and makes their hearts His abode. Only in this way are people turned from sin to righteousness, from judgment to salvation. Yes, and only in this way are they kept in saving faith. Repentance must be an ever-recurring experience in the life of a believer. Hence, until his death, he must make diligent use of God’s means of grace.

This explains why John did not preach merely the Law of God, but went on to tell of the *“Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins”*. In doing the latter, he preached the Gospel, showed them how their sins could be washed away and blotted out from God’s remembrance.⁸

Baptism and its promise was only for the penitent! Many who heard John confessed their sins and were therefore baptised. To these we could fittingly apply the words of Jesus concerning the humble tax-collector and say they returned to their homes *“justified.”* Many of these were later among the followers of Jesus; some even became His Apostles.⁹

The Impenitent Have No Part in the Kingdom of the Lord

However, many others closed their hearts to John’s call to repentance!¹⁰ They were willing to be baptised if they were not required to admit their sins. If John had complied with their wish, he would have made a mockery of Baptism; they, in turn, would have increased their guilt.

Let us take a closer look at these people. Probably many of them were not seriously concerned about salvation. Like many in our day, they may have been prompted by curiosity to see and hear a stirring preacher. People of this kind often have an eye only for externals; the substance of the message eludes them; or, if they do feel something of its inner force, they give it an interpretation of their own, one which removes its sting and leaves them feeling comfortable and unruffled, hence very much as they were.

But there were also representatives of special groups who refused to confess their sins — Pharisees and Sadducees.¹¹ The Pharisees, who were very influential in Israel, had strong convictions about religious matters and were zealous in living according to them. Their teachings and life, however, were out of harmony with the Word of God.

Jesus later denounced their spiritual pride and hypocrisy; but also their belief that being a descent of Abraham assured them of salvation.¹² The Sadducees were a worldly-minded group and were known for their religious indifference and their rejection of the doctrines of salvation through the promised Messiah, of the resurrection, and of the future Judgment.

The Impenitent Must Face God's Judgment

John, instead of baptising these people, denounced them as a *“Brood of vipers!”* and warned them of the judgment sure to come. That this language was not too strong is evident from the fact that Jesus later used the same expression.¹³

Both John and Jesus used it to move these leaders to give serious attention to the seriousness of their spiritual condition and the retribution to which it exposed them. So far as their physical descent from Abraham was concerned, they were to remember that in God's eyes the only true descendants are those who follow Abraham in believing in the Saviour. All others will feel God's judgment. John made it clear that judgment was now rapidly approaching. God had already laid His judgment axe at the roots of the “trees” in Israel. Every tree which failed to bear good fruit would be cut down. How soon these words found their fulfilment!

Salvation Is for All Who Repent and Believe

John's next prophetic words contain great comfort for us who are not descendants of Abraham. They read, *“God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.”* The time was approaching when God would add to His *“faithful remnant”* of true believers in Israel by sending His Word of truth and grace to the Gentile nations to raise up followers among these. This would not be difficult for Him.

He could, if He wished, transform the lifeless stones of the desert into true believers. Hence He would be able to turn the *“stony hearts”* of Gentiles into

*“hearts of flesh.”*¹⁴ He could and would turn the hearts of Gentiles who were still without spiritual life into hearts filled with faith and love and trust.

Christ Himself provided for the fulfilment of this wonderful prophecy. Before ascending to heaven He commanded His Apostles to make disciples *“of all nations”*; after His return to the Father He called Paul to be His Apostle to the Gentiles; after the destruction of the Israelite nation in the year AD 70, He sent His saving Gospel into all the world. Since then there have always been some descendants of Abraham who have turned to Christ, but the great mass of Christians in the Church now are converted Gentiles.

We may properly rejoice that our Lord has received us into His kingdom. But in our minds there should always be the sobering words of Paul that if God spared not the unbelieving Israelites, He will assuredly not spare us either if we fail to worship and serve Him according to His Word.¹⁵

2. John Demands The Fruits Of Repentance

True repentance effects a profound change in people. Natural man’s horizon and aspirations are confined to this world; but the penitent believer’s hopes are raised to heaven and eternity. The thoughts of the former revolve mainly around himself and temporal affairs; but of the latter, about the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. The unconverted pursues his own will and desires, but the believer asks, *“Lord, what do You want me to do?”*¹⁶

It was this radical change which moved those who came to John for confession to ask: *“What shall we do?”* They desired to know how they could now give suitable evidence of their repentance; how they could put their new-found faith to work so that God’s will might be done in them.

Evidence of a Changed Heart

John, as a true teacher and counsellor, told them what the Lord requires of those who are His. He did not merely give them a general answer and say, “Keep God’s Commandments,” or, “Love God and your neighbour.”

Rather he showed them with two concrete examples just how they were to exercise their love and keep the Commandments. He said, *“He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do*

likewise.” Thus John indicated that love demanded that they be merciful, that they share their temporal blessings with the needy.

Now, as the people of Jesus’ day needed this application of the law of love, so do we today. We all need it. When love to our neighbour costs money or trouble or the sacrifice of something we cherish, we are apt to withhold it. Yet that is what true love often demands.

How eloquently Jesus made this clear in His Parable of the Good Samaritan. If we are to share our earthly goods and our time to relieve men’s temporal needs, then we must certainly do this also to help them in their spiritual needs by sending or bringing the saving Gospel to them.

Repentance Demands the Shunning of Evil

Among the penitent who came to John were tax-collectors and soldiers. These people needed additional counsel because their particular occupations exposed them to special temptations.

The tax-collectors were the local tax-gatherers in Israel for the Roman government. As a class they were known for their greed, dishonesty, and extortion.¹⁷ John’s counsel to those who came to him was, *“Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”* In other words: Don’t exploit the public by trickery and fraud and keeping for yourselves what is above the proper amount. Be honest, demand only what is right.

These words apply to tax collectors in our own day. They should be taken to heart also by those who are in business, trade, and industry. True love demands of all people that they refrain from getting other people’s money by dishonesty of any kind. How different the moral tone of our country would be if all our people were brought under the powerful and heart-searching influence of the Word of God!

To the soldiers who asked, *“What shall we do?”* John said: *“Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages.”* Refrain from using your profession and power and weapons to intimidate and abuse civilians in order to exact money from them or for any other reason.

We note that John did not demand that the soldiers forsake their calling. The soldier’s profession is not sinful. The Bible makes this clear.

From Acts 10 we see that our ascended Lord not only directed Peter to preach the Gospel to the centurion Cornelius and to baptise him, but also bestowed upon that military officer “*the gift of the Spirit.*” The Lord’s instructions to Peter contained no demand that he ask Cornelius to change his profession.

From Romans 13 it is evident that governments need military forces just as they need internal law-enforcement officers and policemen. They need both to be able to fulfil their God-given duty to protect their citizens from wrongdoers within and outside their countries and to maintain peace and order.

Hence citizens do not do wrong by serving in the Armed Forces. But God’s demand of them is that they abstain from acts of violence beyond the line of duty; and certainly also from the sins of the flesh, which have become so common in our day. Christian soldiers ought to be doubly anxious to conform to these moral requirements lest they lose their state of grace in Christ the Saviour!

Finally to all of us, in whatever station or occupation we may be, comes the call to turn away from sin and to serve God and our neighbour so that the Lord may come to us daily and make His abode with us and bless us. May He give us grace to heed this call. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ Malachi 3:1-2

² Isa 7:14; 9:6

³ Mal. 4:5 — cf. Matt. 17:10-13

⁴ Matthew 3:2

⁵ Eph. 2:3

⁶ Rom. 7:24

⁷ Isa 40:3-4

⁸ cf. Isa. 43:25

⁹ John 1:37, 40

¹⁰ Verses 7-9

¹¹ Matt. 3:7

¹² Matthew 23; John 8:33 ff

¹³ Matt. 12:34; 23:33

¹⁴ Ezek. 11:19

¹⁵ Rom. 11:17 ff

¹⁶ Acts 9:6

¹⁷ cf. Luke 19:8