

Repentance Prepares the Way

Luke 3:1-20 on January 12, 2025

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Please read Luke 3:1-20 before going further in this transcript.

Over the last couple of weeks, I've had a number of you tell me how much you're hoping that 2025 will be better than last year. For many of us, 2024 was a real humdinger; it beat-up our bodies, wounded our hearts, and troubled our souls. Well, 2025 is already off to a memorable start with the fires raging in Los Angeles. Not to mention, of course, the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as a few other places. And we could mention a number of other things as well.¹ As much as we may struggle with the events in our own day, it's important to keep in mind that things in the 1st century were no picnic either. When John the Baptist launched his public ministry, there was extensive political unrest and spiritual turmoil. Much could be said about the list of leaders at the beginning of Luke 3. You history buffs would know far more details than me, about the reigns of Tiberius Caesar and Governor Pontius Pilate,² and the tetrarchs: Herod, Philip, and Lysanias.³ It was in the midst of a hurting and broken world, that John the Baptist came, as the Forerunner of the Christ, to prepare the way for the Lord. His ancient call to repentance, and his announcement of the good news, still remains a much-needed message for us today.

Luke 3:2 begins, “[*during this time*]^{4 5} the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”⁶ During this time of political turmoil and spiritual upheaval, “the word of God” came to John.⁷ Now, it's easy to

¹ And I'm sure many of us have been reflecting on the life of former president Jimmy Carter; I know for me this has been one of the most encouraging news events so far this year. I was greatly encouraged by his legacy of Christian faith, and his testimony of faithfully teaching Sunday School for so many years; it inspires me to want to press on in ministry, even when the going gets tough.

² In 1961 an inscription was discovered that validates “Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judea.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2073 footnote on Luke 3:1. See photo p. 1995.

³ “ligh SAY nih uhs” W. Murray Severance and Terry Eddinger, *That's Easy for You to Say: Your Quick Guide to Pronouncing Bible Names* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1997), 106.

⁴ “Ancient historians frequently dated an event by citing the year in the reign of the ruler at the time the event happened.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1706 footnote on Luke 3:1-2.

⁵ My Study Bible places John's ministry around the year AD 25-26. But Darrell Bock believes “The data place us in the time of A.D. 29.” *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1706 footnote on Luke 3:1. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 284.

⁶ We find parallel accounts about John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1-12 and Mark 1:1-8, although with slightly different emphases.

⁷ Much like today, everything that happened in the lives of Jesus' followers in the 1st century, happened in the real historical context of the governing leaders of the day. John's message was relevant within the political structure of his day, and it is still relevant in the political structure of our own day, whether that be local, state, national, or global. Our world stands in need of repentance, every person, every leader, every country. In the words of verse 6, “all people will see God's salvation.” Either by being rescued from God's wrath, or by suffering it. In other words, John is preparing the way not only by challenging God's people to repent, but also by challenging the watching world, including the evil tetrarch Herod. Rather than heeding John's warning to repent, Herod throws him in jail. And the Lord allows it according to His sovereign purposes.

breeze right by this, but it's important that we not do that, because there's an indication here of which authority truly matters. Which of the authorities listed in these first two verses is most important? ...not the authority of any of these governing officials, and not the authority of the high priest, but rather... the authority of the word of God! *This* is the source of John's ministry as the Forerunner of Christ: the authoritative word of God!^{8 9 10}

From his wilderness home, Luke 3:3 says that "He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Matthew 3:5-6 describes John's ministry this way:¹¹ "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." So John made his way up and down the Jordan River, and he preached to passersby, as well as those who traveled out to hear him. We'll come back to baptism, but for now let's focus on repentance.

Repentance means "to turn"; so John's call to repentance, was a call to turn from sin and turn toward God. It's a reorientation from pursuing sin to pursuing God.¹² It's a change in our thinking, our attitude, and our heart. *My Study Bible* explains "repentance" well. It includes:

1. sorrow for sin and also
2. a desire to lead a holy life.¹³

John's message of repentance could only go so far though, because it couldn't provide salvation, it could only prepare the way for it. You see, we need to keep in mind that only Christ's death on the cross can deliver us from sin's penalty, and provide us with the forgiveness that we need, for the

⁸ Just as it came to Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah (1:2); Hosea (1:1); and Joel (1:1). *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1708 footnote on Luke 3:2.

⁹ But why did this happen in the wilderness, out in the middle of nowhere; why not somewhere more impressive? Well, that's where John was. Right after his father Zechariah's praise-filled prophecy at the end of Luke 1... Luke 1:80 says, "And the child [John] grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel." So the reason the word of the Lord came to John in the wilderness, is that that's where he was, which verse 4 will go on to explain is where the Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted he would be. By the way, here in the Northwoods of MN, when we hear the word "wilderness" we think of the deep forest, but in Luke 3, "wilderness" would have referred to "a desolate, uninhabited area." Not a wooded forest, but also not necessarily a sandy desert with no water source; the main point is that John lived far from the beaten path. *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1708 footnote on Luke 3:2.

¹⁰ With this wilderness in mind, it's worth considering that as much as Luke's Gospel emphasizes God's TEMPLE in Jerusalem, as a key authoritative PLACE, we should remember that God is at work EVERYWHERE. So we don't need to be in Jerusalem in order to hear from the Living God. (Much like Moses met the LORD at the burning bush out in the middle of nowhere in Exodus 3:2.)

¹¹ Matthew 3:4 says, "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." Whenever I read this description of John the Baptist, I can't help but think of the DC Talk lyrics from their song, Jesus Freak, "There was a man from the desert with naps in his head. The sand that he walked was also his bed. The words that he spoke made the people assume there wasn't too much left in the upper room. With skins on his back and hair on his face, they thought he was strange by the locusts he ate. You see, the Pharisees tripped when they heard him speak, until the king took the head o' this Jesus freak."

¹² See Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 287.

¹³ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1708 footnote on Luke 3:3.

sins of which we repent. Otherwise, we'd remain trapped in the terrible halfway point between being sorry for our sin and desiring a holy life, but remaining unable to receive true forgiveness. So "Repentance Prepares the Way" is the title of today's sermon: "Repentance prepares the way" for God's salvation.

Luke 3:4-6 goes on, "As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. 5 Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. 6 And all people will see God's salvation.'" So Luke points us back to Isaiah's prophecy, given some 700 years earlier in history, and once again, he shows us how these Old Testament promises of hope, are now being fulfilled.^{14 15 16} My *Study Bible* explains the historical background for this: "Before a king made a journey to a distant country, the roads he would travel were improved. Similarly, preparation for the Messiah was made in the moral and spiritual way, by the ministry of John, which focused on repentance and forgiveness of sins and the need for a Savior."¹⁷

In other words, God was using John to prepare the way for the coming of King Jesus, but not so much by filling in the potholes, but rather by preparing people spiritually. Preparing their hearts and their minds, by calling them to repentance from sin. Repent because King Jesus is coming! This imagery of entire valleys being filled in, and the mighty mountains being flattened, vividly illustrates that the Lord is coming in power; absolutely no obstacle will stand in His way.^{18 19 20}

¹⁴ See Luke 1:1-4.

¹⁵ See Isaiah 40:3-5. To many Jews this "describes the final and decisive acts of God on behalf of his people." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2073 footnote on Luke 3:4-6.

¹⁶ In Luke 1:16-17 the angel Gabriel declared, "He [John] will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁷ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1708 footnote on Luke 3:4.

¹⁸ "Isaiah's picture of preparing for God's salvation is a supernatural preparing of a highway... a way of portraying God's coming as powerful and without obstruction." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 293.

¹⁹ I'm still mulling over this comment from Bock: "In 3:4b there is a call to others to prepare the road, while in 3:5 the stress is on what will happen as a result of God's activity." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 295.

²⁰ Verse 6 shows once again Luke's ongoing theme of salvation for ALL peoples, "And all people will see God's salvation." This brings to mind Isaiah 52:10, "The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of ALL the nations, and ALL the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God." Back in Luke 2:30-31, Simeon took baby Jesus in his arms and declared, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations." So John is talking here in verse 6 about Jesus coming in the flesh. The Savior of the world would be SEEN by people throughout Galilee and Judea and the surrounding areas. And even those who would not literally see Him with their own eyes, would nonetheless see God's salvation, and hear about the glory of the Christ as the gospel is proclaimed in all the earth. See Matthew 24:14; Romans 1:8, 10:17-18; Colossians 1:6,23, as well as Romans 1:18-20 with Psalm 19:1-4.

Luke then records some of the specifics of John's message, and believe you me, John didn't pull any punches. Luke 3:7-9 says, "John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham."²¹ ²² 9 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." I grew up in a little church in northern WI called the Crandon Church of God, and we referred to this as hellfire and brimstone preaching. Most of you know, that's not our style here at E-Free Bemidji. And yet, we should be equally sober, and gravely concerned, about the coming of God's wrath.

The end of verse 7 makes it clear that God's coming wrath is something to be feared; something from which we should flee. This "coming wrath" isn't just something far off in the future, at the end of time, it's ready to be doled out even now. Verse 9 says, "The ax is already at the root." The fire's already kindled, and it's ready for the wood to be thrown in.²³ Later on, in verse 17, John declares, "His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."²⁴ This "winnowing fork" "is a word picture that comes from farming. It's figurative for how God will carefully scoop up and separate the "repentant wheat" from the "unrepentant chaff."²⁵ So this wrath about which John is warning them isn't just referring to God's future and final wrath which He will pour out when He throws His enemies into the lake of fire at the end of this age.²⁶ This wrath also includes the immediate and impending wrath for anyone who disregards John's warning to repent: "His winnowing fork is [*already*] in his hand."²⁷

Verse 8 zeroes in on the requirement of true repentance, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance..." So there's no room for empty apologies or false promises; the proof is in the pudding. Genuine biblical repentance leads to brokenness over our sin, which results in a sincere desire to live a

²¹ Consider Romans 4:16 and Galatians 3:7.

²² The end of verse 8 warns us to beware the false security of our religious rituals and our spiritual family tree. We don't get a free pass with God just because our parents or our grandparents are people of faith. We must each personally decide for ourselves to repent of our sin and trust in Christ.

²³ John uses the setting of his wilderness surroundings (stones, barren trees, and snakes) to illustrate the spiritual realities about which he's preaching. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 300.

²⁴ However, also consider Matthew 13:30.

²⁵ *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1595 footnote on Matthew 3:12.

²⁶ See Revelation 20:10,14,15, 21:8.

²⁷ "The OT prophets and NT writers sometimes compress the first and second comings of Christ so that they seem to be one event." *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1595 footnote on Matthew 3:12.

holy life. To be clear, genuine repentance is no guarantee of perfect behavior, but it should guarantee an effort toward changed behavior. In Acts 26:20 the Apostle Paul says, "...I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds."²⁸ Repentance is demonstrated by a change in our behavior; behavior that is informed by a changed heart and mind.²⁹

In verse 10, the people in the crowd asked for further clarification, "What should we do then?" What exactly do you mean here John? So John gives them some very specific examples. In verse 11 John addresses "good works", "Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same." So the fruit of repentance isn't just about being sorry for our sin and trying to avoid the "thou shalt not's"; the fruit of repentance should also result in good works and loving our neighbors. To put it another way, it's not just about not doing the things we shouldn't, it's also about doing the things we should. As John "prepares the way for the Lord," he calls people to confess their "sins of omission," and to change their behavior from inaction to action. When we come to the end of ourselves, and we repent of our wicked ways, it should result in good deeds and generosity prompted by our reverence for God. So, if we have 2 shirts, then we should share with someone who doesn't have a shirt. And if we have plenty of food, then we should share with someone who doesn't have enough food. It's as simple as that.

In verses 12-13, John then addresses "greedy sins", "Even tax collectors came to be baptized. "Teacher," they asked, "what should we do?" 13 "Don't collect any more than you are required to," he told them." The *ESV* translates verse 13, "...Collect no more than you are authorized to do." "The fruit in keeping with repentance" includes not overcharging people. This means not cheating them out of their hard-earned money.

- Not charging unjust penalties or fees, or excessive interest rates.
- Not cranking up the price under false pretenses of high inflation.³⁰

Thou shall not steal; taking something that belongs to someone else is a sin. Even if you know you can get away with it, and even if you know you won't get in trouble for it, God sees it, and He doesn't like it! Even if others think it's smart business, or even if you can justify it as technically "legal," or even if you know that "everyone else is doing it," God says, "don't do it!"

In verse 14, John goes on to address "sins of abusing our power/position", "Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied,

²⁸ See also Jeremiah 18:11, 35:15.

²⁹ "a repentant heart must be demonstrated by behavioral changes." *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2074 footnote on Luke 3:14.

³⁰ Proverbs 11:1 says, "The LORD detests dishonest scales." See also Proverbs 20:23.

“Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay.”

“Abuse of power” has to do with extorting money from others by issuing physical threats in order to get what we want. This includes everything from the bully who intimidates us for our lunch money, all the way up to these soldiers, who would use their physical strength and their weaponry, to convince people that they better pay up, or else!

“Abuse of position” is about these law enforcement officers using their position of authority to falsely accuse people of committing some crime. If you didn’t want them to testify against you in court, and make some false accusation that’s your word against theirs, then you better pay up!

There are two things we need to recognize about these tax collectors and soldiers. First of all, there’s a reason they had a negative reputation: they’d earned it. Even when they did their jobs legally, they were instruments of Roman oppression, but many of them were also thieves and bullies.³¹ So the people had every reason to dislike them and disrespect them. But the second thing we need to recognize, is that *these* are the very people who were going out to hear John’s message and be baptized. These tax collectors and soldiers were rejected and marginalized in their day, because they tended to abuse the power of their positions. Even so, John had some good news for them: even to them, repentance would prepare the way for the forgiveness of their sins.

Friend, isn’t repentance beautiful!? Isn’t it powerful and magnificent in its reach and scope to all people? These tax collectors and soldiers are included in what verse 6 means by “*all people* will see God’s salvation.” Even today, we need to show those whom we dislike and disrespect the beauty of repentance. We need to personally share the good news with them, which begins with a call to repent, to change their behavior and turn to God. In Luke 3:10 the crowd asked the question, “What should we do then?” 1 Thessalonians 1:10 assures us that “...Jesus... rescues us from the coming wrath.” Acts 3:19 answers the question of Luke 3:10, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.”

Even though every one of us sinners has good reason to flee from God’s wrath, we have all the more reason to run toward God’s grace and forgiveness. So those of us who’ve already trusted in Christ, need to share this message with our fellow sinners, and those of us who’ve not yet trusted in Christ, need to repent and turn to God today.

³¹ See *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2074 footnote on Luke 3:12.

After giving these specific examples of what true repentance looks like, verse 15 says, “The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.” The Lord’s hand had been with John since before He was even born, and the Lord’s hand continued to be with him. The Lord raised him up, not as the Messiah, but as the forerunner to the Messiah.³² Luke 3:16 says, “John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. *He* will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” John’s baptism prepared the way for a better baptism. Jesus was far greater than John; Jesus was Messiah. In verse 16 John answered, “I baptize you with water, BUT....” In other words, John’s baptism wouldn’t be enough, because it was only for repentance.³³ ³⁴ Bible commentator Darrell Bock describes this as “a baptism of promise that looks to the greater baptism of the Spirit. It points forward to the cleansing that comes to those, who respond to Mesiah’s offer with faith... John’s ministry is not in itself normative today, since it was a pre-cross ministry that could not address salvation in terms of resurrection realities.”³⁵

By the way, this “baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire” also alludes to the purification of believers, and the Spirit’s cleansing affect in their lives. In other words, Jesus comes not only to rescue lost sinners, but also to cleanse those who’ve been found. His baptism not only redeems, but it renews and purifies, making us holy through the indwelling work of the Spirit’s conviction, to remove the dross, and refine His people.³⁶ So even as Jesus’ once for all sacrifice for sin makes us right with God, God’s Spirit continues His ongoing ministry of sanctification, in a daily process of purification and refinement. So perhaps a number of us here at E-Free Bemidji need to repent of any current sin in our lives. Perhaps we need to invite the Spirit’s cleansing fire to refine and purify us today.

³² See Luke 1:15. Not only was John’s message resonating with people deeply, but ever since the angel Gabriel had announced that his parents would have a child so late in life, people had been wondering about him. When he was born, his parents named him John and Luke 1:65-66 says, “All the neighbors were filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.”

³³ Consider Acts 19:1-7, BUT don’t get too distracted by the speaking in tongues part – this was unique to this time in history when God was demonstrating the coming of the Holy Spirit with outward manifestations. The main connection that we should make today, is that John’s baptism wasn’t enough in Luke 3, and it wouldn’t be enough in Acts 19 either. Mankind has always needed something more: baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as declared by Jesus Himself in Matthew 28:18-20. Verse 18 clarifies that JESUS has the authority; In Luke 3:16 John clarifies that Jesus is more powerful, mightier than him.

³⁴ “Acts 19:4 makes it clear that John’s baptism is not complete in itself, but points to faith in Jesus (also Acts 13:24).” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 289.

³⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke, Vol. 1, 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 289, then 301.

³⁶ Malachi 3:2-3 says it this way, “But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver;”

Luke 3:18 then says something intriguing, “And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.” As much as John’s hellfire and brimstone approach might be off-putting to some of us, we need to understand that what he is preaching is indeed good news. So all this talk of God’s coming wrath, and the ax at the root of the trees, and the winnowing fork, and the fire, ALL of it, is GOOD news. Aren’t you glad that God doesn’t leave us in our sin and brokenness? Aren’t you glad that He warns us about His coming wrath, and offers us a rescue plan? What would this world be like if God just left us to our own resources?

> Imagine if our creator didn’t hate sin and injustice.

> Imagine if He just allowed it to run wild and completely unchecked.

None of us would want that.^{37 38}

Luke 3:19-20 concludes, “But when John rebuked Herod the tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he had done, 20 Herod added this to them all: He locked John up in prison.”³⁹ John was pretty fearless in calling sin sin. Just because Herod was a tetrarch, that didn’t give him a free pass from God’s coming wrath. So John warns him, by calling him out publicly... which lands him in prison. Psalm 51:17 says, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.” Herod chose to reject John’s warning, but today, you and I can choose to heed it. We can respond with a broken and contrite heart that God will not despise.

³⁷ Consider Isaiah 59, especially verses 15-16.

³⁸ If you were here this past summer, you may remember that we did a 4-week series on the Old Testament book of Micah. The last two weeks were about what God delights in, but the first two weeks were all about what God hates: idolatry, rebellion, perversion of true religion, injustice, social wrongs, and corrupt leaders. And as we took time to think these things over and ponder God’s hatred of them, we realized what an incredibly good thing it is that God hates sin! Can you imagine if God were not good? If rather than hating sin and injustice, He embraced it and promoted it? Learn more here: <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/what-god-hates-part-1/> and here: <https://efcbemidji.org/sermon/god-hates-injustice-what-god-hates-part-2/>

³⁹ “John’s imprisonment took place at a later point in time (Mark 6:14-29; John 3:22-24), but Luke followed accepted literary practices of his time by placing this account before Jesus’ baptism to conclude his account of John’s ministry before moving to Jesus’ ministry.” *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2074 footnote on Luke 3:20.