

Prepare the Way of the Lord • Luke 3:3-18

I. INTRODUCTION

A. RR – Luke 3:3-6

³ And he [John the Baptist] 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.’ ”*

B. John’s Mission

1. John knew well he had a special mission in life.
2. The *unusual events* surrounding his birth had been related to him,
 - a. How the angel Gabriel had appeared to his father and announced his birth.
 - b. He knew that his parents had been barren for years and that when he was finally conceived it was well past the age when his mother could even *have* children.
 - c. And John knew Gabriel had foretold he would serve as the fore-runner to the Messiah.
3. We read at the end of ch. 1 that in preparation for his work, John lived in the wilderness.
4. The solitude of the desert was a fitting school for the message John was called to give the people of Israel.
5. As we come to our text today, the years of preparation have come to an end & the time has come for John’s mission to begin.
6. 80 miles to the North in the village of Nazareth, John’s cousin, Jesus, is getting ready to start His mission.
7. It’s John’s assignment to go before Him and prepare the hearts of the people for the coming of the Messiah.
8. These verses tell us how John faithfully fulfilled his task . . .

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 3-6

³ And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,

1. John kept close to the Jordan because not only did he *call* people to baptism, he *dunked* them too.
2. It's right here in this first verse describing John's message we learn something crucial –
3. John understood that the way to *prepare people* for the Lord is to *call them to repentance*.
 - a. The emphasis of his message was not on *baptism* but on what baptism stood for = *Repentance*.
 - b. This becomes clear as we read on.
4. But before we do, we need to understand *just how extraordinary* John's message was.
 - a. Baptism was a standard practice in Israel at this time; *but not for Jews*.
 - c. Baptism was something *ONLY* Gentile converts *TO* Judaism did.
 - d. It was a rite that marked an end to their lives as godless pagans and entrance into a new life as a member of the covenant with God.
 - e. Baptism marked the line between being lost and being saved.
 - 1) But it was something only *Gentiles* did.
 - 2) The Jews figured no Jew needed to be baptized because they were *already* saved.
5. What *John* was doing was calling *Jews* to be baptized.
 - a. He was saying that just as Gentiles had to give evidence of their repentance by being baptized,
 - b. *Jews* needed to repent in preparation for the coming of the Lord.
 - c. They should give *evidence* of their repentance by *humbling themselves* and submitting to a sign of repentance they all agreed *marked* genuine repentance – *baptism*.
 - d. After all, if baptism was good for *Gentiles* as a sign of repentance, why not Jews?
6. John gave this call to his people because the religion of his day had fallen very far from what God intended.
7. *A revival was needed*, and the Messiah was about to appear to

- bring* that revival. John's mission was to *prepare* the people.
9. So he preached a message of *radical repentance*.
 - a. As it says – he preached “**a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.**”
 - b. Only God can *remit*, can *forgive* sins.
 - c. But the sins He forgives are those *we repent of*.
 10. At the cross, Jesus atoned for the sins of the world.
 - a. What that means is that forgiveness for every sin ever committed was made *possible* through the death of Christ.
 - b. But forgiveness *only flows* to those who look in faith to Christ.
 11. Let me use an example: Growing up, there were times when I disobeyed my parents and did something really foolish.
 - a. My mother would find out and discipline me.
 - b. This usually meant being confined to my room after being spanked.
 - c. The purpose of the isolation was to give me time to think about my error.
 - d. But the time of isolation always *ended* when I *admitted* my error and went and *asked* for forgiveness.
 - e. What I always knew was that my mother was *ready* to forgive me.
 - 1) There was never any doubt that the *moment* I confessed my error, said I was sorry, and asked her forgiveness –
 - 2) That she would wrap her arms around me, kiss me on the cheek, and pronounce me forgiven.
 - f. I have to say that sometimes I sulked in my room *for hours* before I sought her forgiveness.
 - g. And there were a few times when I went to her with a *fake request* for forgiveness because I wanted out of my room.
 - h. She always knew the difference between feigned and genuine repentance.
 - i. When it was faked, she sent me back to my room till my heart got right.
 - j. Never, in all the years of growing up did my mother ever withhold her forgiveness when I was sincere in my request for it.
 - k. She *wanted* to bestow forgiveness to me long before I ever asked for it.
 - j. But forgiveness can only be granted to the genuinely repentant

- heart.
12. John knew Jesus was coming to bring forgiveness of sins.
 13. In order for the rivers of cleansing to flow, a channel needed to be dug in the hard ground of a dead religion.
 14. John's call to repentance was the plow the Spirit used to dig that channel by convicting the people of sin.
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15. Now, the Gospels tell us that while the common people heard & responded to John's message with great joy, the religious *leaders resisted* him.
 16. They considered his message *scandalous*.
 - a. How dare he say Jews were no better than Gentiles!
 - b. And of course, by calling the Jews to repentance, John was saying that as the leaders of the nation, they'd not been doing their duty of attending to the *spiritual needs* of the people.
 - c. They'd become more concerned with religion as a *business* to be *successful* at,
 - d. Than with their calling as spiritual leaders to be faithful to God.
 17. When God brings revival to His people, He often has to go *outside* the leadership to find a *new* vessel, some *new* messenger.
 - a. The established leadership becomes entrenched in tradition and the comforts of their office. They don't want anyone rocking the boat.
 - b. It's the very *essence of revival* to "rock the boat;" the religious boat *needs* rocking!
 - c. So if the leaders won't follow the Spirit's leading, then God will find someone who will.
 18. That was John. He was willing to say the hard thing that *needed* to be said.
 - a. And while the leaders didn't like it,
 - b. The common people heard in John's message the unmistakable ring of truth, and responded by the thousands.

19. Luke goes on in v. 4 -

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.' ”

20. John's mission & message had been foretold by the Prophet Isaiah 700 years before.
21. In Ch. 40, Isaiah said John would fulfill the role of a *royal herald* who goes before the king to announce his coming.
 - a. In the ancient world, kings would make regular trips around their kingdoms.
 - b. An official herald of the court would be sent out along the route the king was to take to warn people he was coming.
 - c. This would give them the opportunity to spiff up their cities.
 - d. Of greatest concern was the *road* leading into their city;
 - 1) knowing the King would be traveling along it, they would work to widen and straighten it,
 - 2) filling in the holes and making it as smooth as possible.
 - e. Then as the day of his visit drew near, they'd put a fresh coat of plaster and paint on their homes.
 - f. Watchmen would be stationed on the walls and when the royal retinue was seen in the distance, the word would go out and everyone would run home to put on their finest apparel.
 - g. Then they would line the sides of the street and shout their welcome to the king as he passed by.
 - h. The highlight of the royal trip was when the king would stop and pass out gifts to the people.
22. That's the image Isaiah captures here. John was the royal herald who'd come to announce the arrival of the Lord in the Person of the Messiah.
 - a. The Messiah would come bringing the precious gift of salvation.
 - b. But the people must prepare for His arrival.
23. John made it clear that their preparation was to be done, not by patching their roads, but by *mending their hearts*, turning from sin to God.

B. Luke 3:7-14

⁷ Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, [STOP]

1. Luke refers here to a time well *after* John had begun.

2. The Gospels tell us that the common people heard John *gladly* and that a real renewal began in response to his preaching.
3. Soon, the news spread to all of Judea and people were coming from miles away to hear him and be baptized.
4. But at this point in v. 7, what's happening is a *less than sincere* response to John's call to repentance.
5. Now it's just become the thing to do.
 - a. The multitudes aren't there to hear John, they're there because it's become *fashionable* to make the trek out to the Jordan to see the guy in the camelhair tunic who eats locusts.
 - b. It was all the buzz and it had gotten to the point that if you hadn't gone you weren't *with* it, you weren't *hip*!
6. Remember the "WWJD" craze of a few years ago?
 - a. It began as a response of some sincere believers who read Sheldon's novel, *In His Steps*.
 - b. It was written many years ago and tells the story of several people who's personal choices were governed by a commitment to try to live as Jesus lived.
7. "What would Jesus do?" became a slogan that caught on like wildfire.
 - a. There were wristbands, bookcovers, CD's, musical, bumpersticker,
 - b. You name it - there was a "WWJD" version of it.
8. A lot of youth groups took it on as a program, and many young people ended up with WWJD products simply because it had become the badge identifying their peers.
9. As a guiding ethic for personal decision-making? They had little idea what WWJD meant. It was just a wristband that linked them to their youth group.
10. This is what happened with the multitudes who came out to the wilderness.
 - a. Note how Luke says this –

Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him,

 - b. They hadn't come to HEAR him. They weren't repenting.
 - c. They'd come *to be baptized* with no clear understanding of what or why.
 - d. It had just become a religious novelty. John knows it so he says

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“Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

11. OUCH! John had obviously not attended the Willow Creek or Saddleback Schools of Church Growth.
 - a. He’d not heard that this is not what you’re supposed to say to seekers & visitors.
 - b. This is not the way you approach Unchurch Hester & Esther.
 - c. You’re supposed to be happy they’ve come & win them with soothing words about how *relevant* God is to their lives.
 - d. Don’t use religious sounding terms and for heaven’s sake, don’t say anything negative or critical because that turns people off!
12. John didn’t look at the presence of multitudes as a sign of success.
13. On the contrary, he saw in the multitudes a danger – and it was this: When religion becomes *popular*, people have lost sight of the call to genuine repentance.
 - a. They may go through the motions – But the reality is not there.
 - b. John could see this was *exactly* what was taking place, so he says -

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.

14. John hadn’t forgotten the central message he was called to proclaim – Repentance!
 - a. He knew what the insincere were saying and thinking, that as Jews they had no need to repent.
 - b. They were the descendants of Abraham, the friend of God.
 - c. John warned them not to count on that as their ticket to heaven.
15. What *would* mark them as *true descendants* of Abraham was not genealogy but repentance – the kind of repentance that results in *real change*.
16. John calls them to produce “fruit worthy of repentance.”
 - a. If they’re *really* the children of Abraham, they will do what Abraham did, *believe* God.
 - b. And *that belief* will result in moral and ethical choices that *please* God.

17. John then speaks a word of urgency -

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.”

18. The time for judgment has come & there can be no more delay in deciding what they will do.

19. Repent or resist. The time of *indecision* has *passed*.

20. Even as John spoke these words, Jesus was there among the people, coming to be baptized.

21. It's important every one here today realize that because Jesus *has* come, *indecision* about him *IS* a decision.

a. You cannot decide about Jesus *later*.

b. Either repent or reject – there is no other option. To resist, delay, put it off, *is* to reject Him.

22. If Jesus were to return right now, or a meteor were to come crashing through the ceiling & snuff out your life and you suddenly found yourself looking into the face of God, you'd not be able to say, “Well, I was undecided.”

23. Years ago there was a play Lynn & I wanted to see in LA but we kept putting off getting tickets.

a. We said we wanted to go, and vaguely planned to.

b. But we never did anything concrete about it. Then we discovered that it had left.

c. Looking back, we realized our lack of action had *proven* that in fact, we hadn't *really* wanted to go.

d. Our *real* desires are *always* revealed by our choices.

24. The person who's “undecided” about Jesus *has* decided about Him – He doesn't want Him.

25. Those who truly want Jesus will repent of their sin and that repentance will always manifest itself in their choices.

26. As John made this clear to the people of his day, they responded by asking what he meant by “fruit worthy of repentance.”

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.”

27. John says that true, sincere, genuine repentance will be evidenced by 3 basic changes . . .

- 1) There will be a practical concern for the needy.
- 2) There will be a commitment to personal holiness.
- 3) There will be a quiet trust in God.

28. That’s the fruit repentance always produces.

C. Vs. 15-18

¹⁵ Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, ¹⁶ John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” ¹⁸ And with many other exhortations he preached to the people.

1. John’s message was so unique and the response so remarkable that many began to ask if he was the Messiah.
2. He made it clear that he was only the forerunner of the Messiah.
3. His mission was to *prepare*; the Messiah would *fulfill*.
4. His baptism was for repentance; Jesus would bring the remission of sins.
5. His baptism was with the *symbol* of physical water; Jesus would bring the *reality* of spiritual fire.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Preparing The Way of the Lord

1. I don’t have much time left so let me draw this to a conclusion.
2. As I do, I ask you to please pay close attention and listen actively, not passively.

3. “Lord, speak to Your people”
 4. Jesus came to Israel at the time ordained by God. And what He came to do *only* He could do.
 5. But God sent John *ahead of Him* with the task of calling the people to *prepare* by repenting.
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6. Revival is a sovereign move of God’s Spirit coming in power on His people to rekindle a deep & abiding love for Him.
 - a. Such revivals are marked by a *shaking* of the traditional religious scene.
 - b. “Business as usual” goes out the window as people fill the churches night after night, day after day, for hours on end, with no one leading the meetings except the Spirit.
 7. And while revival is a sovereign move of God’s Spirit that no one can manufacture or program, history also tells us it always comes to those who’ve *prepared* for it.
 8. God calls for some new John to go to His people with a call to repentance because the Lord is coming.
 9. Let me give an example: In Wales, in 1904, Evans Roberts had just begun his training to be a minister. ^[1]
 - a. At 26 he was older than the other students by several years.
 - b. Roberts had hesitated going to seminary because in his zeal for God he’d been afraid formal education would cool his affection for Christ.
 - c. Even in that day, some seminaries were known to rob students of their faith.
 - d. So Roberts had worked for 10 years in the coal mines and as a blacksmith.
 - e. But the calling of God would not let him alone and finally he started school.
 - f. Just a couple weeks into the first semester, Roberts & some fellow students attended special evangelistic meetings not far from the college.
 - g. At the end of the meeting one night, a preacher named Seth Joshua closed in prayer.
 - h. One phrase perfectly captured the longing of Robert’s soul. Seth Joshua said, “O Lord, *bend* us to Yourself.”
 - i. Those words were like a spark of spiritual fire that fell into the

- ready kindling of Evan Robert's heart. He fell to his knees and prayed, "Bend *me*, O Lord!"
- j. Roberts and many others had been praying for revival for some time.
 - k. But that night, as Roberts prayed, he had a vision of hundreds of thousands of people being converted to Christ.
 - l. From that moment on, he had a firm conviction the Lord would bring revival.
 - m. He asked the dean of his school for permission to return to his home church so he could speak to the youth.
 - n. The dean granted him permission to set aside his studies for a week.
 - o. Roberts went to his pastor and asked for permission to speak to the youth.
 - p. He wasn't too keen on the idea but reluctantly consented.
 - q. The pastor then invited anyone who wanted to stay *after* the mid-week youth service to stay & hear what Roberts had to say.
 - r. Roberts shared with them how the Lord had been speaking to a number of the students at college and how present God had been in various meetings around Wales.
 - s. He said he knew those young people could enjoy the same sense of the Lord's presence, IF
 - 1) They confessed their sins and asked God for forgiveness.
 - 2) And surrendered totally to God by asking for the baptism of the Spirit.
 - t. With these conditions made clear, 17 young people remained.
 - u. Roberts then led them in worship and prayer for nearly 3 hours, pleading that God would graciously break down any hardness of heart which might be holding them back.
 - v. One by one, the little group felt the convicting power of the Spirit coming upon them as they began to confess their sins & plead for mercy.
 - w. Though *hints* of revival had been seen in other places in Wales prior to this, that night proved to be the beginning of an outpouring of the Spirit that went on for the next 70 years, reached every continent, and saw *millions* converted to Christ.
 - x. The original 17 along with a few others returned the next night for more worship and prayer.

- y. The night after that more turned out, and each night for the next week saw more and more till the church was filled with people every night.
 - z. The two other churches in town filled every night with people praying and worshiping God.
 - aa. Then they filled the churches during the day as well.
 - bb. It spread to the other cities, over all Wales, Scotland, Britain, Europe, America.
 - cc. The revival was so deep, so real that crime dried up and there was no work for the police, so they formed quartets and sang in the churches.
 - dd. There were numerous business failures – saloons went bankrupt, brothels closed, gambling houses boarded up.
 - ee. Hundreds of new missionaries went to distant lands.
 - ff. And a whole new crop of hymns were written to bolster the worship of God.
10. Evan Roberts knew revival is a sovereign move of God's Spirit man cannot manufacture.
- a. But he was also convinced God wanted to **bring** revival.
 - b. So he did the one thing, the only thing he could to prepare for it; **repent**,
 - c. And call those around him to do the same.

B. To Us

1. Regarding revival & God's will for us: There are only 3 options –
 - 1) God wants to bring wrath & judgment.
 - 2) God wants things to go on as they are.
 - 3) God wants to bring revival.
2. Which do you believe is God's will?
3. We cannot **make** revival happen. We cannot **program** revival. It's a sovereign move of God's Spirit bringing a deep conviction of sin and desperate longing for Him.
4. While we cannot **stage** revival, we **CAN set the stage** for it by preparing our hearts for the Lord.
5. God will do what **only He can do** if we will do what **only we can do**.
6. Jesus wrote letters to 7 churches in Rev. 2 & 3.
 - a. To 5 of those 7 churches, Jesus tells them they need to repent.
 - b. Why? Because He wanted to send His blessing and presence in

- power among them, and sin stood in the way.
- c. The 2 He didn't tell to repent were already experiencing the fullness of His Spirit.

C. Are You Praying for Revival?

1. If you've not even been *praying* for revival – then begin there.
 - a. Ask God to give you a passion to see His people –
 - b. Walking in holiness before Him,
 - c. In love with one another,
 - d. And in deep concern for the lost.
2. If you have been praying for revival, then take the next step – *prepare* for the coming of the Lord.
 - a. Consider the challenge of John in Luke 3 & Evan Roberts a hundred years ago.
 - b. Repent of sin & surrender without reservation to God.

[\[1\] http://www.christian-bookshop.co.uk/free/biogs/roberts1.htm](http://www.christian-bookshop.co.uk/free/biogs/roberts1.htm)