

# Preparing Our Hearts For The Coming Of Jesus.

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Date: 01 December 2024

Preacher: Rev. Callum Macleod

[ 0 : 00 ] Turn back now to the Gospel according to Luke and chapter 3 and we can read the verses 3 to 6.

Luke chapter 3 and verses 3 to 6. And he went into all the region around the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked shall become straight and the rough places shall become level ways and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

We want to turn to this evening to think of what it is to prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus. Preparation is a really important thing. However young or old we are, it's important that we prepare and preparing means that we discipline ourselves to do certain things.

[ 1 : 11 ] It means that we're giving some thought to what might happen afterwards and the need to be disciplined is so important in every area of life because it does two things, at least it keeps our eyes on the task before us and also ensures that there are no surprises along the way.

And in every area of life we prepare ourselves and we have strategies and we have plans so that we are ready whenever such and such a thing takes place. When we read the Bible, God is the great preparer and I guess as we read the Old Testament we can say that God was preparing the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus from the very time that he spoke to Adam in Genesis chapter 3.

He was plotting the path, he was preparing for the moment at which Jesus would be born, his son would be born into this world. And when we begin to read this Gospel we perhaps recognize that because God took so long preparing that the people who were waiting not only became impatient but that they lost sight of the fact that God would do the very thing that he had promised to do. But in the first chapter we see Sechariah going into the temple, he was going to give the sacrifice as part of worshipping God and suddenly there appeared to him an angel of the Lord. He did not expect that but he was waiting for it to happen sometime and the angel told him that their prayers had been answered and that his wife would bear a son.

[ 2 : 59 ] An absolute miracle, surprise, took Sechariah by surprise and took the whole crowd by surprise. And the greatest surprise of all of course was when the angel came to Mary and told her that she was going to conceive and bear a son and she would call his name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins.

And these two surprises come together in a wonderful loving and God glorifying way when in the sixth month of her pregnancy Elizabeth met with Mary and shared their news.

For a wonderful moment all of the preparation had been worthwhile, all of the waiting had last borne fruit and here now was the God who was preparing for this moment is now moving into action.

And when Sechariah praised God for the fact that John was going to be born, he rejoiced as we read in chapter one he rejoiced for the way in which God remembered his people, he blessed his people, he had sent this child to go before the Lord to prepare the way for him and to give the knowledge of his salvation.

A preparation, a plan, a time, a moment, an expectation and a realisation at last of all that God promised to do.

[ 4 : 38 ] And this chapter itself fits right into that preparation and that waiting of the people of God for the moment at which the Son of God, the Lord Jesus was going to be born into the world to be the saviour.

And let's look at these verses this evening against that background and to think of preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus.

We enter into what we call the festive season and that comes in so many things to so many people but there is a focus on the birth of Jesus and tonight we want to think of preparing our hearts for the coming of Jesus.

And first of all we want to see that in these verses we have preparation and we have the preparation because of the way in which John begins his ministry and he does so.

In verse number two he is sent out into the wilderness. The word of God came to John the son of Sechariah in the wilderness and God sends his people into the wilderness in order to test him.

[ 5 : 52 ] It's not like he sends them into any kind of desert that doesn't mean anything. He's talking to people who knew their Bible. He's talking to people who knew their history.

He's talking to people who knew their origin and that their origins were found when God took his people out of the land of Egypt, took them to Mount Sinai and took them into the wilderness.

Why did he do that? In order to test what was in their hearts. And they had hardly stepped on their journey with the Lord and they complained about God and why God did not give them food and why God did not give them water.

God was testing them in the wilderness. And interesting we see that when Jesus came into the world to save us from our sins and God was going to test him to prove the genuineness of his love and of his sonship where was he led by the Spirit of God, not into the city of Jerusalem, but into the wilderness to be tested in the same place.

So when I read that the word of God came to John in the wilderness, then I'm thinking of God coming to test his people.

[ 7 : 09 ] And for ourselves this evening out of wilderness, inverted comes is where God speaks his word into our lives and brings us before him to hear the gospel, the good news of Jesus in order to test us in our hearts, in order to examine us and check our response to the revelation of his son.

And in that sense we are all in the examination room this evening. We are here because God wants to test our hearts what we will do with the message of Jesus.

And when John comes with that message, he comes with a message that speaks of reorientation, a complete change around in their lives.

He went into all the region around Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

We're familiar with baptism, with baptizing our children, with baptizing adults who come to faith. We're familiar with the use of water and baptism.

[ 8 : 20 ] Interestingly when we read about baptism in the Bible, the history behind the word baptism is a picture that those of you who are familiar with the Harris Tweedmill and all of its activities will be familiar with.

The background to it is that I take a piece of cloth, I dip it into a tub with dye and then I draw it out of that tub.

In other words, the color of the cloth changes as it is immersed in the dye and comes out on the other side. It's not something that's unique to their history, it's something that we can understand ourselves from the culture.

John is wanting them to go through a process where what their lives look like today will not be what their lives will look like the following day.

He wants them to immerse themselves in a particular process so that on the other side they will come out different people. The process here that he refers to is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

[ 9 : 34 ] And by throwing attention to what this baptism means, he highlights where the change must take place.

Repentance. If I read my Old Testament Bible, what I see is that repentance is something visible and something physical.

And God is telling His people to come back to Him. They have turned their backs upon Him. It's a physical turning around and facing God once more.

It's something that's more physical. When I come to the New Testament, repentance is something that's more invisible and has more to do with what happens in our hearts, our thought process, our attitudes, our judgments, our acceptance of certain things, our rejection of other things.

Repentance is about turning away from sin, recognizing how bad and evil that sin is. And think for a moment about the thing that you loathe in life most and the thing that you hate in life most and the thing that you never want to see again in your life and the thing that when you saw it, you turned away from it with hatred.

[ 10 : 59 ] That's in a small way what repentance means. It's looking at my sin. It's looking at my life with apporance and with hatred because this sin is against God.

And I'm turning away from that sin because of the way in which I hate it and apporate and I'm turning from that sin to God because there is forgiveness of sins.

And that is a life-changing moment that reorientates my life forevermore that I turn away from my sin and turn to God because at the very center of this process there is such a thing as forgiveness. That's the message. The forgiveness that speaks of God lifting away my guilt, taking away the burden of the guilt of my sin, placing it on the sun and the sun carrying it away so there is no longer my burden and instead of the burden of guilt, it's the joy of the freedom that God gives through my forgiveness.

It's a reorientation. That's what God wants you and I to do tonight with regard to the gospel.

[ 12 : 24 ] To go through that immersion of our lives in what the gospel means and coming out on the other side as people who are changed forevermore.

And unless we understand that that's what the gospel is about, then we will remain unchanged and we will fill our minds intellectually with all of the gospel means and it will never change our lives. The Word of God wants us to embrace, to receive, to take to mind and to heart the truths that are central to the message of John and the truths that are central to the whole of the message of the gospel.

The preparation and the reorientation and in order to drive that home to his hearers, John wants to do two things.

He wants to take the Old Testament scriptures of Isaiah 40, to take something that can be seen visibly around them, to take all of these things together and to help them to see how they must realign their lives.

[ 13 : 41 ] And he takes this quotation from Isaiah chapter 40 in verse 4, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

The valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked shall become straight and the rough places shall become level ways.

When he is taking that quotation from Isaiah, he is taking it from that part of the prophecy of Isaiah which speaks of what God is going to do in the last days.

It's what interpreters tell us is the New Exodus. It was an old Exodus that took him out of Egypt, but this New Exodus is taking him out of their sin.

And here is the image. If we're civil engineers, we will understand perhaps this better because we see the way in which every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

[ 14 : 43 ] There are levels to be sorted. There are things to be filled in and there are things to be removed. Otherwise, the levels will never be changed.

And for ourselves this evening, there are these things in our lives, there are the things that are missing in our lives, things that need to be filled.

And there are things that are in our lives that need to be removed. If I'm driving down the A9 and there's the ongoing, forever ongoing dueling of the A9 and I see the progress that is made and that's exactly what they're doing.

They're blasting away the rocks that are in the way of the levels of the A9. They're filling in the valleys, the troughs so that you get a flat smooth surface.

The levels need to be sorted. And for yourself tonight, God wants you to think about that.

[ 15 : 49 ] What is there in your life that needs to go? What is there in your life that you need to ask God to use the spiritual explosive and to blow out of your life so that there is a clear way in front of you?

And no one else can tell you what that is. But you will know in your heart tonight what it is in your life that is between you and God.

It's a mountain. And in Sechariah chapter 4, there's that picture of the mountain for the people who are going to build a temple. And they can't see that we passed this mountain and God says to this mountain, who are you or great mountain?

Before Sarubhail the king, you shall become a plane. And God doesn't want you tonight to remove this mountain on your own.

It's God who's going to help you do it, but you have to see the mountain first. It's part of this repentance of that change of mind that you see that obstacle that has to be blown out of the way so that your path to God becomes clear.

[ 17 : 02 ] And at the same time, there are things that are gaps. What is missing in your life?

Perhaps the glaring thing tonight that is missing in your life is simply faith in Jesus Christ, that you don't have Jesus in your life.

And when we come face to face with that vacancy in life, that emptiness, that gap in our lives, it's a painful place to be in. But we have to come to see that.

And we have to ask God to take the blinkers of our eyes and to open our eyes so that we will see this empty place that needs to be filled.

And that can be filled with no one else but God through Jesus Christ by the power of His Spirit.

There needs to be a leveling out in your life as part of this preparation.

There needs also to be clear lines and straight lines. I go on the golden road in South Harris and they'll tell me, bends for a quarter of a mile and it'll be as well telling me it's bends for the next 10, 12 miles because it's all bends.

[ 18 : 24 ] And something of that image is here as well. The crooked shall become straight and the rough places shall become level ways.

Lives that need to be aligned with the Word of God. We have that image in Isaiah chapter 30 where there is that message of God speaking out to his people.

They are going their own way and there are words to the effect that you will feel a hand on your shoulder as everywhere and a voice behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it.

There's a straight line for our lives as we learn the Bible. There are the ways of God and we read and sang something of that in Psalm 119.

The ways of God, they're straight, they're direct, they're a clear path to be removed. The stones, the boulders on the road, they have to be removed.

[ 19 : 24 ] And so as well as certainly the levels in your life. God wants you tonight also to make sure the lines are straight, to make sure you go in the right direction, to make sure that there are no obstacles in the way, to make sure that there is a clear pathway.

Why is that important? Because all flesh shall see the salvation of God. That's what the promise of Isaiah 40 says.

And they're saying, what's the point in us doing anything? And God is telling his messengers, go to the hill and speak to the people and tell them, behold, your God is coming.

This highway is for him. The God who is the God of your salvation, he is coming and he is the one who will carry the lambs and his arms.

It's a kind of salvation that God speaks of. The preparation that we recognize all that you and I must do in order for God to come and dwell in our hearts and give us this experience of the love of God and the oppression of his son by the power of his spirit.

[ 20 : 52 ] The landscape of your life has to change. A change that will, you will see yourself and a change that will be evident to other.

So there is the preparation. Actually there is the participation. And we see from verse 7 onwards, he said, therefore, to the crowds who came out to be baptized by him, you brutal vile bush, who warned you to flee from wrath to come?

He wants to grab their attention. And if I was going to come in here and we didn't know these words and I was going to say to everybody here tonight, you're a brutal vile bush.

I'd soon get your attention. And that's exactly what Jesus is doing here. He recognizes what's going on in their hearts and he recognizes their thinking.

He recognizes their confusion. And their confusion is very simple. And we read the rest of the New Testament and we read John chapter 8, especially.

[ 22 : 10 ] We see that Jesus is saying to his enemies around him that they are of their father, the devil, the offspring of the devil.

And that's basically what is happening here in John's ministry. It's something that Jesus builds on in his own ministry. He is recognizing that they think that because of who they are, that they will be part of God's kingdom when he comes.

You brutal vile bush, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? We can think of throwing a bunch of snakes or vile bush into a fire thing.

They will certainly flee. And that's the image here. The wrath to come, the fiery wrath of God that awaits to come in the day of the Lord when he comes in the prophecy of Micah and the Bible Malachi, that is the sense of him coming with fire and with judgment.

So here they are. They're coming to John, having heard his message, and he stops him in their tracks. And he is saying to them, I want you to think of why you are here.

[ 23 : 30 ] Because he was alert to the fact that what was leaving them there was not because of any change in their hearts. It was simply an external thing of going with the crowd and following the masses as we read later on in version number 10.

The crowds are asking, what shall we do, and later on all the people are coming to be baptized.

There's a great crowd gathering around John as he proclaims the coming of Jesus.

And he is stopping them in their tracks and he is wanting them to think of what they are doing and why they are doing it.

And that's a great exercise. I can set out on a path in my life. I can live in my life, not stopping to think why I'm doing what I'm doing, and I can be quite content in doing whatever that is.

It's wisdom to stop and take stock and ask, why am I here? Why am I doing what I am doing here?

[ 24 : 38 ] And to ensure that I'm here and doing what I'm doing for the right reasons. And that's a solid thing for us all tonight.

To ask ourselves the question, why are we here? We are here to hear the Gospel. Well, we come to hear what God has to say to us, but God wants us to think tonight, what is it that drives us here?

What does that brings us back here? Do we think as they did because of who they were, because of their family history, because of their genealogy, that they would be part of God's kingdom at last? It's a great danger. Wherever we have the Church of Jesus Christ in the world, in whatever generation, there is always this great danger that we can become part of the movement, and not really be part of the movement at all.

That it's an external thing, and that our hearts are not changed. And we can see that by the way in which John challenges them.

[ 25 : 58 ] In version number eight, bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abram as our Father, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

Bear forth fruits. Jesus uses trees quite a lot. Buy their fruits, ye shall know them.

A bad tree will not bear good fruit. A good tree will not bear bad fruit. Good fruit is the sign of a healthy tree.

It's a sign of the root being healthy, of the soil being healthy, of the whole of the tree being healthy. Then it bears fruit.

The fruit is there because of the invisible life of the tree, and the invisible root of the tree.

[ 27 : 00 ] And John is challenging them to think about not what they're doing, but to think about what's going on in their hearts.

To think about or to ask themselves, are we here listening to John because we're going with the crowd, or are we here listening to John because our heart has changed through the ministry of John, and we desperately wish to see Jesus, for whom John is preparing the way.

What is there in our hearts? Is the fruit that we see in our lives rising from the heart that has completely changed, that has gone through that reorientation, that realignment that we spoke about in preparation?

That question for yourself tonight, that sense of where is my heart? That sense of do I love the Lord Jesus, or do I not?

That sense of is Jesus the person that I must have, what can I carry on my life without Him? It's that defining decision and choice and attitude that shows who I am, and that proves that the genuineness of my outward activity, that this is because of the new life that God has planted within me.

[ 28 : 46 ] It's searching into the depths of our beings, and coming to see whether we're here or not, to see whether God has worked or not.

Whether you're able to do that this evening, and to find a sincere desire for the Lord Jesus.

Paul was telling the church in Corinth to carry on doing the great change that came in their lives in the 7th and 7th, he rejoiced because they had this scotty grief that produced repentance. He speaks of the way in which their lives were cleansed, the way in which they were full of seed and love, the way in which they were angry with sin, the way in which their whole lives are turned around in the relationship with Him because the lives are changed around in the relationship with God.

The sincerity, the genuineness show bare fruit in keeping with repentance.

[ 30 : 02 ] And there's an image behind that call to bare fruit and it's the sense of the balances. Remember the story of Bill Shars in Daniel chapter 5, and the writing on the wall, and you are weighed in the balances and you're found wanting.

So here are the balances. Here is what repentance looks like. It's that rare orientation, it's the new levels, it's the new lines, it's a new life that's turned around.

This is what repentance means. We put all of these on one side of the balances. Then God wants us to take our lives and to go through this checklist.

Notice what the Bible says about repentance. Go and see if that alignment is there. Go and see if that leveling is there. Go and see if that line is there. I put all these things down on the other side of the balance and I'm looking for a reflection that tells me that my life is in accordance with what the Bible says about repentance.

Are you in the balances this evening and found wanting? By the grace of God, are you able to say that what God requires God has worked and God has provided in your life?

[ 31 : 29 ] It's a wonderful place to be, to have a life that is balanced out in the light of the demands of the Bible.

Do not say in your hearts that Abraham is our Father. Don't say that. For I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

The children of God are the result of the creative power of God. And whether there were stones around them in the wilderness or not, when John spoke to them in this way, he knew that he could connect them with the Bible in places like I say at 51.

Look to Abraham, your Father. Look to the rock from which he was hewn and the quarry from which he was dug. Look at all of these ways in which God took Abraham, not because his Father was a believer, but he took Abraham out of nowhere, out of the curledies and he took him and he made a covenant with him and he gave him promises.

Abraham was God's creation. And God says through Ezekiel in chapter 36 that he will take the heart of stone out of the flesh and give them the heart of flesh.

[ 33 : 01 ] It's a creative power of God. And John is not and the Bible never does ask you or me to do the work that only God can do.

But the Bible is asking us to examine and to see in our own hearts whether God has done the work or not. And that's the purpose of the searching of the Bible, the searching of the Word of God, that you and I will come to examine and come to be encouraged if we discover that God has worked and come to, if we discover that he hasn't worked, to be awakened, to prepare.

We said at the beginning is that the importance of that preparation that will order our lives, the examination, the participation, only through what God can do and will do in our hearts.

And as we close, that brings us to the perspective. We said at the beginning that one thing that preparation does, you have a strategy, you have a plan.

You don't always round the corner, but you know that the day is coming and you want to be prepared so that there are no surprises. That's what John is saying to them here in verse number nine.

[ 34 : 30 ] Even now, he's told them and we're at the beginning that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, it's nearby. But at the very same time, there is something else going on and it's important that they have this perspective.

And it is that even now at this very time, the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

The ax is laid to the root of the tree. It's a tree bearing good fruit or bad fruit. The ax is sitting there. It's waiting for the instruction from God. As he gives in the book of Revelation, in the one he says, the harvest of the earth is ripe.

Take your sickle and go and reap. The ax is sitting there waiting for God's instruction, for judgment to come.

[ 35 : 36 ] And for that ax of judgment to be swung and to cut at last the batteries that are not bearing the good fruit.

And John goes on and read also in Matthew chapter three, when he speaks of the Lord Jesus, there is one coming after me and I'm not worthy to tie his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Here we have the picture of gathering the wheat into the barns and the chaff fully burning with unquenchable fire in verse number 17.

It's a fine of judgment of God. That's the alert for us to the urgency of the preparation, to the urgency of ensuring that we are participating by the grace of God.

Because the day is surely coming when there will be the separation and it's not a separation that any cursing or any church or any denomination will do.

[ 36 : 49 ] It's a separation that God will do and it will be accurate, it will be exact. There will be no mistakes, there will be nobody in heaven should not be there.

There will be nobody in the fire of hell should not be there. The just judgment of God. And so tonight let's think of the preparation that is necessary for ourselves personally.

Let's think of how we want to participate and to be part of the kingdom of God. Let's remember that judgment is on the horizon.

This is an important and urgent matter and may God help us to see it like that and may we have that perspective of the whole of the word of God that in this promises for salvation and this call to prepare shall time limit on it.

There shall time set when the opportunity will be there no more. And may God bless us with this so that we will share in the joy of the coming of Jesus and share in the joy of his kingdom.

[ 38 : 03 ] Use us sincerely and wholeheartedly and with joy because our sins are forgiven because of what he has done and he has baptized us with this Holy Spirit to give to us that new life.

May God bless his word. With bell heads in prayer.