

The Preparatory Work of Repentance

Luke 3:4-6

April 10, 2016

John's life and ministry, it provides us, all of us, the people that he preached to, but also us as well living in the 21st century, John's ministry provides us with a very necessary perspective that we need to understand the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. You need to get what John is saying because otherwise, it's very easy for you to maybe to misinterpret, especially in this modern world, to misinterpret what Jesus is actually saying. Now Jesus and John didn't have different messages, same message. You need to hear, though, the undiluted, powerful message of John the Baptist to set your mind right.

So if you're looking at Luke Chapter 3, follow along with me as I read the first nine verses there Luke Chapter 3 starting in verse 1. "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being the governor of Judea, and Herod

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being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it 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, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the *rough* places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God. 'He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe 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.'"

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Let's stop there for this morning. From just those few opening verses, we see that this man, John the Baptist, is a rather strong dose of medicine. Isn't he? He's nothing if not direct. He's confrontational. And he even seems to us a bit rough, doesn't he? Some might even call him harsh. And if we're honest, if people are honest, many would have to admit that a man like John the Baptist would make them feel pretty uncomfortable. He is not the kind of man people want to invite over to join the dinner party; might make the guests feel uncomfortable. He's not the kind of man that people want to hang out with and watch the big game with. On a human level, there is a sense in which someone speaking prophetically, someone leveling the boom on our true condition, exposing our sin and our self-righteousness, dragging hidden sins into the light, someone like that speaking prophetically has a repelling effect on people.

It was that way from a long time ago; all the way back, people of Israel spoke of God that way. When God gave the Ten Commandments, a gracious act of condescension to help people, it says in Exodus 20, verses 18 and 19, "Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightening and sound of the

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trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled," as well they should, "and they stood far off and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we'll listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die.'" Holiness, unvarnished and undiluted, can have a repelling effect on sinful people. If we're honest, that probably says more about us than about God, than about men like John the Baptist, right? Discomfort with God's prophet is discomfort with God himself. Perhaps we're somewhat squeamish about this issue of holiness. We're not always comfortable with those who are absolutely and uncompromisingly committed to holiness. That's always been true.

With that in mind, though, there's something I want you to notice in verse 7, Luke 3:7. Two little words that reveal something we might not expect having said this about holiness. You see the two words there, the crowds. John spoke not to the few who could tolerate his strong words. John spoke to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him. Matthew tells us Matthew 3:5 to 6, "Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River confessing their sins." Mark says the same thing. People were flocking to John. They were

leaving the comforts of home, the responsibility of jobs and families. They were breaking their familiar routines of town and city to go out to an unfamiliar, hostile environment to get near to John. He was someone they wouldn't invite to their home as a dinner guest, yet they'll inconvenience themselves, and pretty significantly, to go see him. Why? What explains this? How do we understand this popular appeal of John's rather confrontational ministry?

Well, as we learned last week, part of what explains the interest in John's ministry was the desperation of turbulent times, the oppressiveness of Roman occupation represented in the text here by Tiberius Caesar and Pontius Pilate. There was also the fractured leadership, regional leadership, represented by the Herods, you had Herod Antipas and Philip and Lysanias. Israel was suffering, absolutely suffering under political oppression, the tyranny of social injustice. It's during troubling times that people most need answers from spiritual leadership, right? Perhaps some of you remember back to 9/11 in this country. When the churches were filled. They were packed with people seeking answers for what was going on, what had just

happened. Someone help me interpret this spiritually,
religiously.

And in times of spiritual turmoil, political turmoil,
turmoil all throughout the country like these times in which
John the Baptist came, people look to spiritual leadership, but
what did they find in Israel? Those in charge of shepherding
Israel, they were absolute wolves. Annas and Caiaphas and all of
the other high priestly cronies, they were fleecing the flock.
They were more interested in holding power and getting money,
utterly uninterested in serving people by teaching them the
truth. It's tragic. Desperate times make desperate people. And
sinful people who are desperate, they don't make righteous
decisions, do they? On their own, people don't drift in a
Godward direction; they only sink more deeply into their own
sin, their self-centeredness, their unrighteousness. Paul
explained this in Romans 3:11 through 18. Very strong words that
applied originally to Israel when they were originally written,
but Paul applies them to us all. He says in Romans 3, "No one is
righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for
God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good, not even one. Their throat is an open grave,

they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes." All those, by the way, are quotations from the Old Testament pieced together to make an argument, psalms, and prophets, and writings. And they were immediately applicable to the target audience in the day in which they were written, but they were also, as Paul points out, they were applicable to the people in Paul's day. And they are also applicable to us in our day as well. There is nothing new under the sun. The human heart is the same.

No one seeks God by his or her own instinct. On our own, like Israel of old, we say, "Do not let God speak to us, lest we die!" But the mercy of God is in this: He speaks anyway. He comes. He sends his prophets. He draws near. And in fact, immediately following the people's cowering appeal before Sinai, Moses told the people of Israel, he said this, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you that the fear of him may be before you that you may not sin." Isn't that interesting how he put that? "Do not fear, God wants you to fear." That is, don't cower and

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run away; revere him and draw near. The fear and the reverence it's a good thing. God wants you to fear him so that you will repent, and he will receive you, and so that you will not sin. That may encourage some. But the text tells us of the response of most people in Exodus Chapter 20. It says, again, that the people stood far off while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was." And that portrays the Biblical contrast, yet again, of the many versus the few. Many stand far off, religious as they are, they stand far off while few draw near to him in sincerity and truth.

So God sent John the Baptist, just as he sent Moses, just as he had sent all of the prophets, God sent John. And this time, the entire fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets was coming, it was on its way. The king was coming, and God wanted to get the people ready. Notice at the end of verse 2 it says, in the days of Roman oppression and Herodian despotism, in the days of priestly unfaithfulness and cronyism, "The word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

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When God sent John to prepare the way before Christ, he wanted the people to hear a clear, unambiguous voice. So, God prepared John, not in the city, not in the town, not in the family, but in the wilderness, in the desert, alone. As we said, that made it clear to the people that John had no political interest or ambitions at all. He was beholden to no man; quite the opposite, in fact. The son of a Levite, John truly represented God. He could be trusted. John represented the true priesthood. He signaled the restoration of the true priestly office in Israel. He was doing what priests ought to be doing. Not running businesses at the temple, overseeing the money changers, and the lenders, not running the bank. That's not what priests do. They preach the truth. John was way outside the establishment with no ties whatsoever to Annas and Caiaphas. Nothing sullied his reputation. He wasn't associated with that whole racket. The word of God came to him where he was, out in the wilderness. The word of God came to him as it had come to Jeremiah and to the other prophets as well, calling him into prophetic ministry. John is, as it says in verse 4 there, "A voice of one crying in the wilderness." He is a conduit of divine speech. He's not just a voice, he's a trustworthy voice that communicates the divine message without ambiguity, without confusion at all. John is

clear, and it says he was crying out, that's a verb that means, loud. He was loud about it.

Also, as we said, he was a rather direct voice. He could be trusted to tell the truth. What truth? Well, it says here he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Again, not a works righteousness thing. Get dunked in water and earn forgiveness of sins, that is not what he was preaching. That's not what he was teaching. It's not what the people understood. It's not what you find taught anywhere in the Bible, Old or New Testaments. Forgiveness is something granted, not earned. God forgives us as a gift of his grace. He doesn't reward us as if it's something we're owed because of our merit. Our good deeds don't outweigh our bad deeds. If we see things from God's perspective, we see how cluttered our lives are and weighed down by bad. Even our good is laced with bad. At the same time, while God doesn't allow the earning of forgiveness, he doesn't grant forgiveness to the unrepentant. It's a gracious gift, but he doesn't give it to just anybody. He opposes the proud, in fact. He opposes the unrepentant sinner who refuses to bow the knee, refuses to submit the heart but he does give grace to the humble. And, in fact, he doesn't just give, he gives, he

forgives, and he keeps on giving. God lavishes those he loves with every good thing in Jesus Christ. And those who humble themselves before him in repentance and faith, you know, they find him to be kind and tender. They find him to be merciful and good toward everyone who draws near in repentance and faith.

So what is this repentance? Well, it involves humbling yourself in sorrow over your sins. It involves abandoning yourself in your sin, turning from your sin, walking in the obedience of faith and that means at the very core of our thinking, there are things that we must understand and agree to in the Bible. We must understand and agree with God. There are things that we need to abandon and forsake. And there are things we must pursue. To repent means understanding the truth of God's word. It means agreeing with it. It means embracing it because we love it because we love God and we pursue him relentlessly with a heart of obedience because he holds our deepest affections. That's repentance. That's the attitude of repentance.

We're going to keep getting more specific and clarifying the doctrine of repentance over the coming weeks because you'll

notice John gets more specific and more concrete in the verses that follow and we have more to learn. But for now, let's raise the question again. What attracted so many people to such a confrontational ministry? I mean, John spoke such uncomfortable words, starkly penetrating words even of indictment. Why did the people go out to the desert? John was calling people to humble themselves. He was calling people to acknowledge their sinfulness, to acknowledge their abject spiritual destitution, to admit their uncleanness. Frankly, they stank to high heaven. The people needed a baptism of cleansing, and if they would humble themselves on the outside, submit to this baptism of repentance, it would at the very least picture what they needed on the inside: a cleansing, a forgiveness of sins.

And that, folks, was the bottom line. That's why they left the villages, the towns, the cities, to go out to these remote wilderness regions because deep down inside they knew, as every single one of us knows, as everybody on this earth, living right now knows, they knew they were sick. They knew something was deeply wrong, fundamentally flawed. They knew they're spiritually bankrupt. They know they needed healing. They have a conscience just like you do. They have a law of God written on

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their hearts, just like you do. They feel condemned. They even use the language of, should and should not, ought and ought not. They know something is wrong. They know they live in a way that they're gonna have to give an account for. Many people running from it all the time. But people know inherently they're sinful. They need a Savior. Sure, John's ministry was a spectacle, but God designed this spectacle. God sent John ahead of Jesus, and he was doing the preparatory work of preaching repentance. Why? So that God could comfort his people. So that God could show them his own glory. So that God could show them mercy. They needed to hear the message of repentance.

And beloved, that's what we need, too, isn't it? That's what we need, to know the comfort of our God, to get a greater vision of the glory of God, to turn away from the distractions of this world and look and gaze upon his greatness, his glory, his name. We need to be delivered by the mercy of God. There is no lasting comfort in this world. Only God provides eternal comfort in all that is great and glorious in this world, whatever it is, it all points and it only points to the surpassing glory of our infinitely great God. We will only know God's comfort, we will only see his glory if we are first saved by his mercy. Our sins

have separated us from him and it's by his mercy that he delivers us from wrath. He removes our sins. He receives us to himself.

Folks, that's what we need. That's why God sent John to prepare the people for comfort, for glory, for mercy. And that's why I hope no one who hears this message will respond like Israel did, like many in Israel did, shying away from holiness, standing far off from the strong message of repentance. Rather, we need to see the mercy of God in the strong message of repentance. "God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." That's what we need to embrace for ourselves. That's what we need to preach to others, the message of repentance. It's not only preparatory to receiving the grace of God, you know what? It is the grace of God. He's gracious to confront us and then to heal us. That's mercy. That's true grace, and don't let anybody tell you otherwise.

Let's take a look at the points there listed in the bulletin one by one. We'll start with point one there, that's

why it's listed as point one, start there: Repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort. Repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort. Look at verse 4 again, just the first part of that verse. It says, "As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet." It's written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet. Now, it could have simply said, "It is written," because that is the formulaic statement that signals something of prophetic significance. "It is written." So we know because Luke, by the way, does not waste words, we know that Luke is telling us something more expansive, referring us back to the Old Testament. Luke wants his readers to know that John's ministry, what John is doing, it's not without prophetic significance. John is not here some maverick. He's not doing whatever he thinks God is telling him personally. He's not making this up. He's not operating under his own sense of personal inspiration or his own angst, his own frustration with the political leadership, and the spiritual leadership of Israel. This isn't about his axe to grind. John is not acting on his own, he is speaking directly for God.

So when John comes preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," you know what? God is saying, "Repent for

the kingdom of heaven is at hand." When John calls the people a Brood of vipers, that's not him going off half-cocked, going a little too far. That's God calling people a brood of vipers. Luke wants us to see that. He wants us to see there is a historical continuity here. Luke wants us to see there is a biblical theological continuity in John's ministry and message. This is not a break from the past, this is a fulfillment of what was spoken in the past, what had been written in the past. And that is to say this, John was planned. This whole phenomenon of John the Baptist, planned. God did this. John's proclamation, "A baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" that's God's idea, not John's. That's God's message. John, he's simply the voice. He's the mouthpiece. God is making repentance an issue and John is just the means by which he makes it an issue.

But Luke doesn't just tell us, it's written. He's not just talking about a historical continuity. He doesn't move on from there. He says, "It is written," where? "in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet." You know what that tells you, Gentile reader? Luke is saying, look it up. Go check the context. He's also telling us where to find these particular words. We listened to those words earlier, didn't we, as we were

reading from Isaiah Chapter 40? Go ahead and turn back there, even now to Isaiah Chapter 40, because there's something I want to show you. Consider the context of what Luke recorded here more carefully. Some of you may know that Isaiah's prophecy really comes in two parts: you've got Chapters 1 through 39 and then Chapters 40 through 66. The first part of Isaiah has more of an emphasis on God's just judgment for Israel's idolatry. There's a lot of condemnation in there, a lot of warning, a lot of promise of coming judgment. That culminated in the conquering of Judea and the exile of the Jews to Babylon. But then the second part, that has more of an emphasis on God's restoration of Israel because of divine grace. Both sections, Chapters 1 through 39 and Chapters 40 through 66, both of those sections contain judgment and mercy. Both of them contain God's wrath for their sins and God's grace in restoring them. But restoration promises are concentrated in the second half. They really shine there, and that's where we find the prophecy about John's ministry right at the start of God's restoration promises. His ministry is promised in Isaiah. It is the preparatory work that ushers in God's restoration mercy and his restoration grace.

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Take a look at Isaiah 40, verses 1 and 2, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God." Now notice those two words, comfort, comfort. Those are commands, okay? "Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned and that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." Listen, this is the context that Luke wants us to keep in mind, especially as we're introduced to the remarkable strength of John's ministry, which is curiously strong, like Altoids. Curiously strong ministry. Apart from this context of comfort, John's ministry seems harsh. It seems out of place, especially when he starts calling people a Brood of vipers. It's hard to see the grace there, at first glance. But John's message of repentance as preparatory, it is in itself a work of grace. And notice what God says there, "Comfort, comfort my people." It's an imperative. It's a command, and it's repeated for emphasis, followed by the direct object, my people. You go comfort my people. God has a people and he's commanding his prophet to comfort them. Just to emphasize his command, he follows up in verse 2 with the parallel concern there, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem." In case you don't know what comfort means, here's another way to approach it: speak tenderly, cry to her. There's

an intense, sustained, repeated call to comfort the people of God.

One commentator named E.J. Young refers to this as a "Vigorous proclamation." I love it when God is vigorous about comforting us. Do we not need it? E.J. Young says, "Those commanded are to call out to Jerusalem in a bold, decisive manner so that there will be no uncertainty as to the message. By this crying aloud, all doubts will be removed, and all will know the surety of the comfort proclaimed." End Quote. That is right. Certainty; all doubts removed.

In our study of Luke earlier, that's been his concern, too. Certainty. Luke 1:3, "That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught." God wants the preaching to communicate divine certainty, not to dabble in human doubt. Certainty. Why? Because the delivery of his message of comfort is at stake. Threefold message of comfort there in Isaiah 40, verse 2. Take a look at it there. The cessation of hostility, the pardon of iniquity, the sufficiency of penalty. Oh, this is so, so gracious! The first part of this message of divine

comfort, an end to Jerusalem's warfare. You know, that means no more attackers. That means no more aggressors, no more oppressors, and persecutors sent by God to punish Israel for her sins. The second part of this message of divine comfort, the pardon of iniquity, the forgiveness of sins as the rest of Isaiah's prophecy unfolds particularly when you get to this incomparable treasure of Isaiah 53. We see that this refers to the final, all sufficient atonement provided in the suffering servant, the Lord Jesus Christ. He bore the sin of many, and he makes intercession for transgressors.

Finally, the third part in this three-fold message of comfort, Isaiah 40:2, says, "She has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins." That's just another way of saying God's punishment, it's not reckless, it's not willy-nilly, it's measured. As bad as things get, as severe as the consequences may be, God is still in control. He's sovereign even over the suffering. His punishment is under his control. It's measured out, and Jerusalem's punishments, well, they have an end. Just as a footnote here, that three-fold message of comfort provides a three-point outline for the rest of Isaiah's prophecy, chapters 40 through 66. The rest of the prophecy unpacks those

three words of comfort. But that's another study for another time, all right?

If any of the Jews who visited John in the desert, who were baptized by him in the Jordan River, if they had bothered to look up the context of Isaiah 40, they would have seen that John's ministry signaled the restoration of Israel, especially when he started calling himself, "A voice calling out in the wilderness." They would have gone back and seen that his ministry signals the restoration. It signals the coming of the Messiah. They would have been reminded and greatly encouraged by Isaiah's promises of restoration. If they had kept reading, they would have seen that the emphasis is on repentance for sins. The emphasis is on the need for atonement because the coming of the Messiah was to rule the heart before he came to rule the land. He was to rule from the inside before he ruled politically on the outside. And the prerequisite for all of that is a repentant heart. John's message of repentance, it was preparing them for the rule of Messiah, a rule that started in the heart and then worked its way to the outside.

The first problem, then, was to deal with the internal rebellion of human sin. Once sin is dealt with, once sin is subdued, well Christ is Lord over those who are rightly related from the heart, having received the forgiveness of sins. And then it makes sense for him to be ruling from on high on David's throne in Jerusalem. That was the comfort that Isaiah preached. That was the comfort that John preached. It was a comfort that was received by repentance and faith. And that's what Luke wanted to remind us of by pointing back to the context of what Isaiah wrote. That's what is written in the book of the words of Isaiah, the prophet. John's message of repentance prepared the way for people to receive divine comfort.

There's a second point we want to observe written there in your outline in the bulletin. The second point: Repentance prepares the heart to see divine glory. Repentance prepares the heart to see divine glory. Now, keep a finger in Isaiah 40, but turn back for a moment to Luke 3 verse 4. After connecting John's ministry to what is written and reminding us of the context, which explains John and his ministry, Luke quotes the pertinent section from Isaiah. Here is what he says in Luke 3:4-6. He says, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare

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the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall all become level ways, and" verse 6, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'" Now having read that, turn back to Isaiah 40 and verses 3-5. It's almost word for word. But where verse 6 in Luke Chapter 3 says, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God," notice what the original wording of Isaiah's prophecy says. A voice cries, in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the uneven ground shall become level and the rough places a plain. So far, Luke and Isaiah sound a lot alike, right? But listen to the difference, verse 5, "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Luke simply summarizes that verse with this, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." In Isaiah, though, it's the glory of the Lord that's revealed. That's what all flesh sees, is the glory of the Lord. And we must not miss the significance of the wording in both contexts in both, Isaiah and in Luke because these passages point to the significance of the preparatory work of repentance in the heart.

Now, hold on in your mind Luke's picture. We'll come back to that in just a moment, but I want to first focus on Isaiah's imagery because without repentance, people cannot and they will not see the revelation of the Lord's glory. They will miss out on that entirely. The picture here in Isaiah Chapter 40 is of a victorious king. He's on the march. He's returning from conquest, coming back from battle, coming back to take what's rightfully his, which is the throne. This is a Messianic passage with Christ pictured as a mighty conqueror. And notice first there is a voice that cries out, and it's the voice of an unnamed herald who goes out ahead of the coming king, and here's what he shouts, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God!" Notice the connection in this passage, just by the way, this is a clear Old Testament reference to the deity of Christ. You see that there? You see the parallelism between the Lord, who is who? The Messiah, right? And our God. Tuck that passage away for the next time you encounter a Jehovah's Witness at your doorstep. Pull this one out and show them Jehovah is the same as our God. It's the Messiah.

Back to the point. When you picture the wilderness and the desert, don't imagine something like the Mojave Desert, something like the Sahara, some broad flat plain, some dried-up lake bed. The Judean deserts and the deserts to the north of Galilee, this region called Trachonitis, those Judean deserts, the Galilean deserts, they were like badlands. They were rough, rough places, treacherous terrain. You had to watch every step; didn't want to traverse it at night without light. And the herald knows the greatness of the king who follows him. And he is calling people to prepare for that king, to get to work. He's calling them to prepare the way, to straighten the path from badlands into a highway. The call is to turn the wilderness badlands into a newly paved, six-lane freeway. This king is so supremely glorious that the earth itself must make way, must be readied to ease his return. And the next verse there expands the thought even further to make the herald's meaning absolutely clear lest there be any confusion at all, here's what he means when he says, "Prepare the way." Verse 4, "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." The word, valley, there refers to a valley of any width, wide or narrow, it doesn't matter. If there's a depression in the terrain, fill it in with earth, pack it down, level it out. Go

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further still, from the highest mountain to the smallest hill, every peak that would dare to elevate itself above this king, level it. Every single peak that stands in the path of the coming king all need to come down. Everything needs to be absolutely level.

You say, that is ridiculous. What unrealistic demands. What kind of a herald.. Who do you think we are? Even if it were possible to level every mountain and every hill, to fill up every valley, the cost would be so incredible it would bankrupt the earth. The amount of effort and energy required, it would absolutely kill the labor force. That job is so unrealistic, it's impossible. And the herald would reply, ah yes, I understand. You obviously haven't seen the glory of this king. Then he'd turn to others and say, for those of you who want to see the glory of this king, spare no expense, spend all that you have. Spare no effort even if it costs you your life. Embrace the impossible because the glory of this king is worth it. No expense is too great. No effort is too much. Smooth the way before him. Our God is incomparably great, incomparably holy.

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Listen, folks, I realize we don't tend to think like that. But that just reveals our dullness. It reveals our failure to grasp the greatness of our God. Listen, his splendor is so magnificent. His holiness is so awesome that paving the entire earth ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times over is worth the effort just to catch a glimpse of his glory. Ours is the simple solitary cry of Moses, "Please show me your glory." Look, if we get this wrong, if we make a wrong judgment about this, and we think that the cost, the energy, the effort is not worth the trouble; you know what, we won't see the glory of God. That's guaranteed. And that's why I say, back to our point, repentance does the preparatory work that's necessary to allow us to see the glory of God. We need to repent of our dullness. It's not okay to be lazy. We have to repent of our laziness. We have to even repent of our small faith, our weak faith. We need to pray and plead for strong faith. Faith that, what? Moves mountains, right? We need to embrace the attitude, the bold daring of this messenger, this herald, this voice that cries such an audacious cry. Prepare the way for the Lord, make the terrain level for our God. Fill the valleys, level the mountains. Don't leave any spot uneven and smooth every rough place. Our God is coming to us, and we will do whatever it takes to see his glory. That's what John came to say. He was sent by God for the conversion of

dull, hard-hearted people. Listen, people like me. People like you. They need to stop looking at the earth, at people around them, they need to stop looking at the obstacles. They need to humble themselves, bow low in the dust, find no resource in themselves, find no resource on this earth and they need to look up from the earth and long for the glory of God because only he can do the work. They need to submit to John's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, if they're ever to see the glory of God.

Turn back to Luke's Gospel, Luke 3 verse 4-6, because there is more in Isaiah's imagery here that we need to see. But we're going to consider it from Luke's perspective, what Luke has told us. And this is John's perspective as well. Luke Chapter 3 verse 4-6. Take a look at point three in your outline: Repentance prepares the heart to experience divine mercy. Repentance prepares the heart to experience divine mercy. Now, keep in mind the context of Isaiah's prophecy is this, repentance is all about God's comfort to sin-sick people. Sin, your sin, my sin, sin is dragging the human race to the bottom of hell. It is a terrible, tyrannical slave master. So comfort begins with confrontation, and the confrontation, I understand folks, the confrontation

with sin is hard. It's painful. It hurts. Keep that in mind as we read verses 4-6 again. "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see," not just the glory of the Lord, but, "the salvation of God." As we said, the call to level the terrain, it pictures the greatness of the glory of God. But Luke has summarized what Isaiah said, "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together," with that line in verse 6, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God."

So if this is all about salvation, what do the deep valleys and the high mountains picture? What are the crooked, rough places that are being portrayed here? The deep valleys, they're the depths of our sins. The word that Luke uses comes from the Septuagint. And it's a word that refers not just to any wide valley, but it refers to a ravine or very narrow valley. The channels of sin run deep in the human heart. They cut through, and those need to be filled in, those channels; that is the work of repentance. The mountains and the hills here are the heights of pride. All those high places need to be leveled, absolutely

obliterated. That, too, is the work of repentance, to humble the proud of heart, to level their high-mindedness before the glory of God. And listen, I can tell you this, folks, it is easier to completely change the terrain of the map of the entire world than it is for one sinner to repent. The hardness of the human heart is harder than any granite, any mountain, any hill; it's higher than Everest, this pride. The sin goes deeper in every single one of us than any of the depths of the ocean trenches on our earth. That's why repentance, regeneration is a true miracle from God. When the heart is divided by deep valleys of sin, when the sins flows freely through those channels, you know what? The ways are crooked, treacherous, deceptive. Sin makes crooked ways. When a heart is high and lifted up, when it's self-centered and proud, the, the paths are rough and course and bumpy. Pride leads you to rough places. Crooked ways, rough places they may have an allure, I understand that, too.

Momentary intoxication, but you know what? They prove treacherous over time. They deceive you. Proverbs 13:15 says, "The way of the transgressor is hard." Ultimately, at the very end of the road, crooked ways and rough places lead the soul straight to hell.

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That's why John came preaching repentance, to prepare people to experience divine mercy. Repentance in sinful proud hearts, it's compared here to moving the earth, leveling the terrain. It is painful. It's difficult. It is costly and, as I said, humanly speaking, totally impossible. I might as well change the landscape completely. Same comparison here. With God, though, all things are possible. Amen. I'm so thankful for that. And that's why Luke summarized Isaiah in verse 6, "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." Salvation is God's work, and that means repentance is God's work, too. Folks, we're not able on our own to fill in the deep valleys of our own sins. We can't do this work. We're not able on our own to demolish the proud thoughts of our hearts, not on our own, we're not. It's God, 2 Timothy 2:25, who "Grants repentance leading to life." "It is the kindness of God," Romans 2:4, "that leads us to repentance."

So what do we do? If we can't do anything, what do we do? Well, we humble ourselves and we pray. And here's what we pray: God be merciful to me, the sinner. It's not a pretentious prayer, it's simple. Be merciful to me, the sinner. We ask God to give us the gift of repentance and faith, and God will always answer that sincere prayer for those who want to turn from sin

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and want to embrace him in holiness and truth. And you know what, folks? That is why the proud will never come. They will never repent. Since they refuse to bow the knee voluntarily, God will one day send his son Jesus Christ to return to earth to cause every knee to bow by force. "He will rule with a rod of iron." And that's what Mary referred to when she said in her song, she sang, Luke 1:51 to 52, "God has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones." Remember Luke 3:1 to 2, the, the word of God bypassed Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, and the Herod's? The word of God wasn't subject to the machinations and the greed of the corrupt high priesthood, it was hijacked by Annas and Caiaphas. The word of God came to John, son of Zachariah in the wilderness, and that meant people needed to climb down from their thrones and abandon the thoughts of their hearts, be willing to humble themselves, make a trip out to the desert.

But that humility wasn't enough. Once they got into the desert, these Jews needed to submit themselves to a ritual of cleansing, one that acknowledged they were no better than a Gentile dog. You like being called, a Gentile dog? Neither do I,

but it's what they thought of us. John is telling us here that they needed to consider themselves no better than us. Nothing but a destitute sinner. No one but people begging for the mercy of God. John called sinners here to abandon their crooked ways, to make straight paths, leave the positions of power, places of prominence, all that the hell-bound people of this world count so dear, go out to the desert, go out to the wilderness and when you hear the voice crying out, repent. Those barren places where John conducted his ministry they picture the true condition of a Christless soul, it's dry. It's without water. It's barren, it's without shade or shelter from the heat and the elements. It's lonely. It's without companionship or fellowship. That's what makes the location of John's ministry such a perfect setting for preaching a baptism of repentance, because repentance means you acknowledge your own spiritual barrenness. It's pictured by the fruitless wasteland of the deserts. It's in the barren places that God comes to visit us with his healing mercy, turning the barren ground into a fruitful land of plenty.

Well, we said repentance prepares the heart to receive divine comfort, to see divine glory, to experience divine mercy. We can sum that up with one word. It's the word, salvation,

there in verse 6. It's through the preparatory work of repentance that "All flesh shall see the salvation of God." All flesh. Salvation is the comfort of God. It is the glory of God. It is the mercy of God. We are saved from our sins and that is mercy. We're saved to worship God and that's glory. We're saved for joy and satisfaction and contentment in him, and that is eternal comfort. Salvation is proclaimed to all the world, and in that sense it's a universal Gospel. No one is preferred above another. That reference to, all flesh, is just a figurative way of speaking of all mankind, Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and free, noble and common. Once again, we see Luke's emphasis on the universality of this call, saving people of all kinds. Universality of the Gospel means that each and every individual, then since the call is to all of them, well, you know what? The accountability is to all of them as well. All are accountable for their repentance or their failure to repent.

In fact, it's interesting to note that all of the leaders that Luke names, all the positions of power in verses 1 and 2, they each have their own personal encounter with the call to repentance in the Gospel. The religious leaders, Annas and Caiaphas, both had an opportunity to see the salvation of God,

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to repent. In fact, Jesus stood right in front of them. Remember, at his trial, John 18? It says they, "led Jesus to Annas, for he was the father-in-law of Caiaphas, the high priest that year." In verses 19 to 23, Annas is questioning Jesus about his teaching. He had an opportunity, didn't he? Annas sent Jesus, verse 24, "bound to Caiaphas the high priest." You know what? The religious establishment, it didn't repent. The regional leaders, they too, were exposed to the message, but they didn't repent either. In Luke 3, right here with John the Baptist, it says in verse 19 to 20, it says, "Herod the tetrarch, who had been reproved by," John, "for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison." You know what? Just silence the voice.

That same man, Herod the tetrarch, that's Herod Antipas, he cut off John's head at the urging of the wicked Herodias. Later, Jesus himself stood before Herod Antipas, and in Luke 23:7 to 11 says, "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to him." Boy, he is not getting it is he? He had heard about him. "He was hoping to see some sign done by him." Hey, miracle worker, come on, monkey, do some tricks for me. That's

what he's thinking, come into my courtroom and let's see a display of power and wonder. "So he questioned him at some length," Jesus made no answer. "The chief priests and the scribes stood by, vehemently accusing him. And Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him." Paul stood before another Herod, another regional leader, in Acts 25 and 26. It was Herod Agrippa II and his sister Bernice. Those regional leaders, all of them corrupt, had one more chance to repent, but they didn't. They walked away. They walked off the pages of Scripture.

That leads us to the imperial leadership. First, Pontius Pilate, who heard Jesus' case in Luke 23, he washed his hands publicly of the whole affair, delivered Jesus over to the will of the mob to be crucified. He did not repent either. Gospel went to Rome as well. Do you remember that God sent an angel to strengthen Paul, telling him in Acts 27:24, "Do not be afraid, Paul; for you must stand before Caesar." Well, even though that ship that he was on was fated to a shipwreck, God sent into a shipwreck, Paul nonetheless made it to Rome. And, he did testify to Caesar, ultimately to no avail, for Caesar anyway. Sadly, the emperor didn't repent either. But you know what? God didn't send

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Paul to Rome for the salvation of the emperor. God had the repentance of some much more important people in his mind, his people, chosen from before the foundation of the world. They come out in a letter he sent to the church in Philippi with this salutation, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household." God sent Paul to Rome for them. Some of God's elect, some of Christ's bride were members of Caesar's household, and God sent Paul there to evangelize them. You know how Paul knew them? You know how he identified them? You got it. When he preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins, guess what? They repented. "Not many wise, not many powerful, not many noble but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong; God has chosen what's low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

By design. That's us, folks, right there. That's us. We are the repenters. Repentance has done its preparatory work in our hearts. It's prepared us to receive God's comfort. It's given us the, the undying hope of seeing his glory. It's allowed us to

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experience his full mercy and pardon. I'm so thankful, aren't you? Because, folks, we get to see the glory of God. Doesn't matter what happens next fall in the voting booth, does it? It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if the whole world is overtaken by Islam, does it? It doesn't matter. We're repenters. We will see the glory of God. Let's pray for many more to repent and embrace the Gospel that John preached, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is by faith and faith alone.