

Luke 3:1-22 // Signposts to Salvation

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 3 verses 1 to 22 which is found on page 1029. So that is Luke chapter 3 verses 1 to 22 on page 1029.

! In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod's tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iteria and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked road shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, and all people will see God's salvation. John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, You bread of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.

The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. What should we do then? The crowd asked. John answered, Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same. Even tax collectors came to be baptized.

Teacher, they asked, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you're required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, and what should we do? He replied, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely.

[1 : 50] Be content with your pay. The people were waiting expectantly, and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come.

The straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hands to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff of unquenchable fire. And with many other words, John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

But when John rebuked Herod the Tetrarch because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all. He locked John up in prison. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven. You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks so much, George. Let me add my welcome. It's great to see you all here. And a special welcome if you're here for the first time of visiting. We're delighted to have you with us.

[3 : 08] And we'd love it if you're able to stick around afterwards so we can get to know you a little bit better like that. Do keep your Bibles open at Luke chapter 3. That would be a great help to me and to yourself.

But at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, right at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, he tells us why he's writing. He tells us he's writing so that we can have not confidence but certainty about the things that we've been taught about Jesus.

So that would be a great prayer for us, wouldn't it? Let's pray and ask God for his help as we come to his word. Lord God, we thank you, Lord, so much.

We give thanks to you that you are a God who speaks through your word. And as we come to think about Luke's Gospel this morning, today, and over the coming weeks, we pray that your spirit would be speaking to each of us here in each of our situations, addressing us and building our confidence in the Gospel and helping us to know beyond certainty that Jesus is our Saviour and our Lord. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, we're starting a new series today in Luke's Gospel. We're jumping straight in at chapter 3.

[4 : 38] But over the course of the coming weeks, we'll be looking at the life and ministry of Jesus and asking some of the biggest questions that anybody could ask.

Who is Jesus? What's he come to do? And what do I need to do in response to him?

And yeah, we're jumping straight in at chapter 3. Today, we're going to come back around about Christmastime to look at the birth stories of Jesus and his cousin, John the Baptist, around about then.

But for now, we fast forward 30 years. And before Jesus even steps on stage, Luke introduces us to John the Baptist.

But here's the thing. Even though today's passage is all about John the Baptist, it's actually all about Jesus. Why?

[5 : 36] Because John's whole ministry, his whole life really, was a signpost to Jesus. John the Baptist is a signpost.

Now, here's the thing about signs. If we get the slide up there. That's Roland Barthes. He's a French guy. You can sort of tell he's French somehow. I don't know if it's his scarf.

It's about the only picture I could find of him where he wasn't holding a cigarette or a cigar. But we don't need to worry too much about Roland Barthes. We just need to know that he made a whole career out of thinking about signs.

And to save us the trouble of reading Roland Barthes, basically his whole philosophy boils down to this. The sign is not the thing. The sign points to the thing.

And Roland Barthes uses a lot more blah, blah, blah than that to get to it. But the sign is not the thing. The sign points to the thing. That's the message from him. Now, imagine you're Monroe bagging.

[6 : 37] And you've saved Ben Nevis till last. I know you probably wouldn't. It's maybe not the most exciting one to do last. But you pull into the car park. You hop out. And your mate immediately goes.

And he stands next to the Ben Nevis sign. Takes a selfie. And posts, I climbed it. That doesn't count. Of course not.

The sign isn't the mountain. It's just there to point you towards the mountain. And John the Baptist's job is just like that sign.

He's not the destination. He's not the main event. But he's the signpost whose job it is, is to point us to Jesus. And in Luke chapter 3, John's ministry is actually like a series of signposts.

Each one of them telling us something important and vital about who Jesus is and what we're to do in response to him. So the first signpost, the first thing we're seeing today is that Jesus is a signpost that points forward to Jesus.

[7 : 51] The most monumental moment in history bringing global salvation to all. Chapter 3 begins. It's not a fairy tale.

It doesn't begin once upon a time. This isn't made up myth, but fact. Real people, real places. But there's more.

Luke deliberately sets this on the global stage. In the second term of President Donald Trump, when Xi Jinping ruled over China, Vladimir Putin was on day 1,263 of his 10-day special military operation in Ukraine.

Jeff Bezos honeymooning in Venice. And Elon Musk was taking the huff. The word of God came. Do you see what Luke's doing here? Luke's lining up the heavy hitters of the day.

And yet, they're just the backdrop. Chances are, we'd never have even heard of half these guys, or even any of them, if they hadn't been about when Jesus entered this stage.

[9 : 21] The big event. The event. The one that affects everyone. The one that affects you and me. is Jesus' arrival on the scene. In John's ministry, he's the signpost pointing forward to Jesus.

You see, while the power players are preoccupied in the corridors of influence, verse 3, the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

John went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now, you maybe know this, but Luke, the author of Luke and Acts, tracks four key figures through Luke and Acts.

John the Baptist in this chapter, Jesus in the rest of Luke's gospel, Peter in the first half of Acts, and then Paul. Each of them begins, each of these four figures begins, with an initial sermon, anchored in an initial Old Testament passage.

A passage that sums up the big purpose of their ministry. And for John, that passage is Isaiah 40. We heard some of it earlier, but it's there in Luke chapter 3, verse 4.

[10:42] The voice of one calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him. The Lord God is coming. And all people, verse 6, will see God's salvation.

The big picture in Isaiah 40 is that God's people are in exile in Babylon. The promise that the Lord God himself, the divine shepherd, will come and lead his people home.

We'll bring them back to the promised land. And now Luke identifies John. And this is key for us to notice. Luke identifies John as that long prophesied voice.

He's already told us in verses 2 and 3 that John is out in the wilderness calling out to the crowds out there like that. So when he quotes Isaiah here, Luke's saying, this is him.

John the Baptist is being identified as the preparer of the way. He's the one who's come to get things ready. He is the preparer of the way. He's a signpost pointing forward to who?

[12:02] Well, according to Isaiah 40, he's a signpost pointing to the arrival of the Lord God himself, the divine shepherd. It comes, verse 6, so that all people will see God's salvation.

So do you see what this means? If you scan across to verse 15, Luke spells it out for us. The people are so impressed with John, they wonder if he might be the Messiah.

But Luke makes it clear in verse 16 that there's a categorical difference between Jesus and John. John baptizes with water. It's a symbol of repentance.

But Jesus, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Only God can do that. John even says in verse 16, So Jesus, he isn't just some other preacher or prophet.

He is the Lord God himself coming to lead us out of spiritual exile, coming to bring his global salvation. So John the Baptist isn't the thing, but he is the signpost.

[13:29] What a signpost, pointing to the arrival of Jesus, making salvation available to us all. And you know, John had a vital role in getting those people ready for Jesus' arrival.

And this leads us on to our second signpost. Back in 2011, Glasgow finished one of the biggest road construction projects in Scotland, the completion of the M74 motorway, bringing together two major motorways and carving a brand new route through the city center.

Personally, it's carved off several minutes of my journey time to St. Silas, for which I am thankful. But to make it happen, engineers had to shift millions of tons of earth, including recycled bits of debris from the Gorbals flats, build huge bridges of some of the largest mobile cranes in Europe, and clear away everything that blocked the path.

And not all that, so that once the road was opened, nothing would slow the traffic. That was the idea anyway. But that's exactly the kind of picture that Isaiah paints for us here.

In the ancient world, when a visiting dignitary and a king or an emperor came, you didn't just kind of hang out the bunting, you built an approach road.

[14:56] And that's what John the Baptist was called into the world to do. Verses four to six say he is to be a spiritual civil engineer.

His job, just look at verse five, was to raise the valleys, lower the mountains, smooth out the bumps, and straighten the bends.

We're not talking literal landscape changes here. This isn't a geography lesson. This is moral topography. John was preparing a hard-hearted, spiritually exiled people for their coming saviour. Working, of course, not with concrete and cranes, but shifting the spiritual obstacles, the hardness in people's hearts. Now, it's just worth us saying that that was John's job for that particular moment in history.

Sometimes we can get the wrong idea and we think, I need to sort out myself first and then I'll come back to Jesus. I need to fix my mess and I'll come back to church after that.

[16:02] That's not what this is saying. John's role wasn't to tell people to save themselves, but to point them to the one who could. He doesn't sugarcoat it, does he?

In verse seven, John says, You brood of vipers. Ouch! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

This was John's big purpose. The approach road that John was building was repentance. Turning from sin and turning back to God.

The Lord was bringing salvation to all people. But only those who were repentant were able to receive it. And that brings us to the next signpost, the U-turn.

Because if you're heading in the wrong direction, you don't just slow down. You don't just switch lanes. You turn right around. And repentance isn't simply saying sorry.

[17:10] It's a total reorientation of life. A heart change that issues in a change of behavior.

And John the Baptist warns us in verse eight, if we're to flee the coming judgment, we must, we must produce fruits of repentance.

So what does he mean by that? Fruits of repentance. repentance. He's not being moralistic. He's saying you can tell by the fruit whether the tree is good or rotten.

Good works don't make you right with God. But getting right with God will result in changes in your life. It will transform how you live your life.

Repentance isn't optional. It's essential to our salvation. We must produce fruits of repentance.

Now, the problem is that we are experts, experts at avoiding repentance.

[18:21] We're experts at pretending that we don't need to, that we're better than we actually are.

And you know one of the ways that we kid ourselves on if we want to justify continuing in our sin is we kind of say to ourselves, well, I go to church, I'm in a small group, I help out there, I serve there, I do my bit.

Surely unrepentance isn't all that important. Kind of tick the boxes and we think we're all right. For John's hearers, their equivalent, they would say, well, I'm in the right club.

I'm a child of Abraham. But John's ready for them. He shoots them down. Just look again at verse 8. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

Don't play the Abraham card. That's what he's saying to them. It doesn't matter if you're in the right church. If you keep on refusing to repent, you're unable to receive salvation.

We must repent. Okay, so what does that look like? Well, here in our passage, here's three truths about repentance.

[19:43] Three things we can learn from this passage about repentance. Repentance, first of all, involves humbling ourselves. John, he wasn't just preaching repentance, but he was baptizing with a baptism of repentance.

Where was he doing that? It happened in verse 2, out in the wilderness, verse 3, by the Jordan River, the boundary of the promised land, the dividing line between the land and the wilderness. And to be baptized by John, you left the land, and then you symbolically came back into the land through the water. It's a sort of visual way of saying, yes, we live in the land physically, yes, we're back in the land physically, but spiritually, spiritually, we are still in exile.

We need the divine shepherd of Isaiah 40 to come and bring us home. That's why John calls them a brood of vipers. He's not being a shock jock for the sake of it.

He's saying, you think because of your status in the Abraham Club, you're the solution to the world's problems. But really, you're part of the problem.

[21:06] Never mind being a seed of Abraham. Deep down, you're a seed of the serpent. By nature, you're on the serpent side, and you need rescued.

So part of repentance means swallowing our pride and accepting God's verdict on us.

We deserve his wrath. We are spiritually unclean. We're dirty and we need a bath. So repentance is about humbling ourselves and recognizing that without Christ, we don't have a leg to stand on.

Secondly, repentance is urgent. It's not something to keep on putting off. We're experts at avoiding repentance altogether. We're also experts at postponing it for as long as we can get away with it.

Well, we think I'll deal with it later as things pile up like dirty dishes. But John is saying, no, we must repent and it's urgent.

[22:23] Look with me at verse 9. The axe has already been laid to the root of the trees and every tree that doesn't produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

For the people that John the Baptist was speaking to this, of course, was a unique moment in history. Jesus was about to step onto the scene, but actually repentance is always urgent.

We're never to think that we can put it off until tomorrow. Jesus has come to deal finally with sin. He's accomplished that on the cross. Salvation is open and available to us all. as we sang earlier in the all-age song, Jesus is coming back again.

So I think this is just a very sobering thought in our passage. Those who refuse him, who keep on refusing him, will face God's anger.

[23 : 31] And that's something, friends, that we all want to avoid. repentance involves humility. Repentance demands urgency.

Thirdly, repentance results in actions. As Ruth prayed earlier, real repentance shows up in real life. an inward change always produces outward fruits, the fruits of repentance. Real repentance shows up in real life.

Three groups of people ask the same question to John in the wilderness. They've not been put off by being called a brood of vipers. In verses 10, 12, and 14, they ask the same question.

What then should we do? Asked the crowd in verse 10. Same question, verse 12 from the tax collectors, verse 14 from the soldiers. What should we do?

[24 : 31] What do fruits of repentance, what do they look like in my life? I love how practical John's answers are.

So read with me from verse 11. Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none and anyone who has food should do the same. Even tax collectors, would you believe, came to be baptized.

Teacher, they asked, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you're required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, and what should we do?

He replied, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay. These verses, friends, show us how practical repentance is in the Christian life.

Repentance doesn't mean retreating from life and going and living in a hermitage, becoming a monk or something like that. It's the opposite. John says, don't give up the day job.

[25 : 35] Go back to your old life, but do it differently. If you're a tax collector, leader, don't quit working for the government, but do it honestly.

If you're in the armed forces or law enforcement, don't ditch your uniform for tie-dye. You don't need to go and live in a hippie commune or become a peace activist necessarily, but serve with integrity. Go back to your normal life, but be distinctive. We get a brilliant example of what this looks like for Zacchaeus later on in Luke's Gospel in chapter 19.

It's a famous Sunday school story. Zacchaeus is a tax collector who everyone hates because he's been lining his own pockets by cheating people, but then when Jesus shows up and shows him kindness and grace, it completely changes Zacchaeus.

He produces fruits in keeping with repentance. Zacchaeus goes from being a grabber, me, me, me, me, me, to being a giver. He gives away half his possessions to the poor.

[26 : 48] He gives back four times what he cheated on anyone. That's what repentance looks like. That's what the fruits of repentance look like for Zacchaeus. Not escaping from everyday life, but living it God's way.

You see people in need, verse 11. Give generously to them. And don't get caught up, verse 14, in a culture of consumerism. Be content with what you have.

Be someone of integrity. Be somebody who's honest. Be somebody who's generous for Christ. You see, a repentant life produces practical, visible change.

People should see the difference in you. Now, I have his permission to share this with you. I won't embarrass him by naming him, but recently a Christian brother shared frankly about working in a high-pressure environment where the jokes were crude and the language was colorful.

And he found himself joining in with it. And it's easy, isn't it, to get carried along and go with the flow. And it's just very easy to try and fit in like that.

[28 : 07] But one day, a Christian colleague pulled him aside. What are you doing? That's not who you are. And it was like a wake-up call for him.

He realized what we say and what we do, how we act, matters. People notice. And so he had to repent of that and change his behavior in the right place.

Repentance isn't just remorse. It's living our lives differently. It's how we speak, it's what we look at, what we laugh at, it's how we carry ourselves, how we conduct ourselves.

Someone else was describing her experience of being in middle school like being in the film Mean Girls. It was all about fitting in, it's all about being popular, knowing who's in and who's out. It was cliquy and gossipy and basically not very nice. But following Jesus means standing out in that kind of situation. So if you're here and you're a teenager and following Jesus, the fruits of repentance in your life might mean being kind to everyone, no matter who they are.

[29 : 21] It might mean including the person who everyone else ignores, even if it costs you popularity. see. I think it's worth us all thinking about, isn't it?

What would it look like for me? What would the fruits of repentance look like in my situation today? What would producing the fruit of repentance mean in my life?

And perhaps there's something that the Lord has been nudging you about over this past while. Maybe it's a habit or a relationship or an attitude, maybe it's being generous or maybe it's doing the thing that you've been dodging for the past few months.

Whatever it is, if Jesus walked through the door today, what's the U-turn he'd expect to see in your life? The final signpost shows us why repentance can't wait because up ahead there's a fork in the road.

Let's look again at verse 15. The people were waiting expectantly and wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them, I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

[30 : 47] He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat and into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Why is repentance so urgent? Because when Jesus comes, there will be a great salvation, but there will also be a great division, and there will also be a great judgment.

That's the big idea here. A winnowing fork lifted, harvested wheat up so that the wind could blow it away. the chaff and leaving the grain to be gathered.

That's the picture. Jesus will do the same spiritually. The wheat, those of us who belong to him, will be gathered safely into his barn.

The chaff, those who reject his call for repentance in their lives, will face unquenchable fire.

[31 : 56] The point is simple. How we respond today to Jesus matters forever.

How we respond to Jesus now, friends, matters forever. other. And those who reject him now, set themselves on the wrong trajectory.

Every time we hear God's words, we're taking one of two roads. Either we humble ourselves, confess our sin and live out lives of repentance, or we stubbornly refuse him.

And that's true if you're here and you're looking in on the Christian faith, exploring the Christian faith. If God is addressing you today, you should take that seriously.

if that's you, we'd love to speak to you afterwards. If you'd like anybody to speak, just come and speak to myself and Martin and one of the staff.

[33 : 09] We'd love to chat to you about that. So that's true if you're exploring Christianity. It's just as true if you're already a Christian and you want to keep going pressing on in your walk with the Lord.

In the last verses of our passage, Herod provides us with a sobering warning. In verse 15, John calls him out on his scandalous marriage.

In verse 16, Luke says, Herod added to all his other sins by locking John in prison. Some people, like Herod, hear God's call to repent and instead of responding, they try to silence it.

I think that's a sobering warning because ignoring God's word, heart. It doesn't leave you neutral. It hardens your heart.

And I've seen how that plays out firsthand. When I was at school, there was five or six of us who every year from age of about 12 or 13 up to 18, I would think, went to Scripture Union camp up to the legendary AV3 camp up in Aviemore where I met for the first time the legendary Michael and Susan Reader Harris probably back in 1993 or something like that, I would imagine.

[34 : 41] But we came, the five or six of us from the school, we came from broadly similar backgrounds. We all came from, to a greater, lesser extent, church going homes.

We sang the songs, we read the Bible, we prayed the prayers. But as we got older, things changed. One by one, we began to drift.

And by the end of our first term at university, I would think only two of us out of that six were still walking with the Lord.

The rest, including myself at the time we'd walked away, we'd stopped going to church. We lived the lives we wanted to live, not the life we the Lord Jesus called us to live.

And so what do you think happened? Well, our hearts grew hard. We made excuses. We justified ourselves.

[35 : 48] We told ourselves it wasn't that big a deal. But it was a big deal. The longer we ignored God's word, the longer we ignored God's call to repent, the harder it became to hear, the harder it became to respond to.

And as far as I know, the rest of them are still doing their own thing, walking far away from the Lord, apart from the two that stuck with it.

As for me, well, it was only by God's sheer grace that years later he brought me back. He softened my heart and enabled me to respond in repentance.

You know, I can't emphasize enough just how precarious those years were for me. Those years in the wilderness, those years in spiritual exile.

Friends, don't make the mistake that I made. don't make that mistake. Don't wait to repent. Don't assume you'll always want to.

[36 : 59] Don't presume on God's grace that you'll always be able to. So if you're here today and you know you're heading down the wrong track, don't just slow down.

Don't just drift in the same direction. Make that U-turn now. The time to respond is today.

Jesus' offer of salvation is open to us all. There's nothing you've done, there's nothing that you can possibly have done that can't be covered by his grace.

Just come back to Jesus. Jesus. And so as we close, can I encourage us all, let's be incredibly thankful that God has given us this amazing invitation to bring us home from spiritual exile.

He warns us because he loves us as a loving father. So we don't harden our hearts, but instead be a repentant people.

[38 : 15] shall we pray? Let's just take a moment to reflect on God's words in the silence of our hearts.

Lord God we we thank you for the reminder today that though our hearts are so often stubborn and calloused and wayward though we so often are unfaithful you are always faithful you are faithful to forgive we sent the Lord Jesus to offer salvation to all the world help us therefore living God to receive this grace with open hearts and not stubbornly reject the one who came to love us and save us

Lord Jesus we want to pray for those here today and those who are not here but that we care about deeply would you call your prodigals home would you draw them back to yourself with your love with open arms would you extend your grace to all those who turn back to Jesus for we ask this in his precious name Amen Amen