

The Preacher of Repentance

Luke 3:1-9

1. Introduction.

- a. Chapters 1 and 2 are the infancy narrative. Chapter 3 begins with John the Baptist as a grown man. He now begins his ministry in Israel.
- b. He comes preaching a very hard and confrontational message of repentance.

2. The setting (1-2).

- a. Luke is writing as a formidable historian (c.f., 1:1-4).
- b. The purpose of these names, titles, and locations is to place the events in real time, space, and history.
- c. The entire point of vss. 1-2 is found at the end of v. 2 – “... the word of the Lord came to John.”
 - i. The reason for the 7 names, titles, date, and locations, is to recreate the political, religious, and social setting.
 - ii. Nothing good is associated with any of the names. Any person reading the Gospel would have known what Luke was doing.
 - iii. The point, then, is to understand that the Word of the Lord comes to John in the midst of a tremendously bleak time.
- d. It's also important to understand that Luke is placing John in the faithful lineage of God's prophets.
 - i. Vss. 1-2 express a common, but distinct formula for introducing a prophet (e.g., opening verses of the OT prophetic books).
 - ii. Furthermore, God always raised up a prophet when the times couldn't get any darker. As such, their one message would always be the message of repentance. This was the clear situation with John.

3. The Ministry (3-6).

- a. John begins an itinerate preaching ministry near the Jordan River (3).

- i. John was likely part of the Essenes – an ascetic group living in the desert.
- ii. He was removed from the political culture and religious institution.
- iii. “Baptism of Repentance.”
 - 1. This is not saying John was preaching that baptism saves.
 - 2. Rather, His message was the message of “repentance.”
 - 3. Historically, when a person wanted to identify with a certain message or religion, they would then be baptized by the one from whom they heard the message.
 - a. This would then signal their new identity. They would now be identifying with the messenger and their message.
 - b. As such, when people heard John’s message of repentance, they wanted to identify with it.
- b. In vss. 4-6 Luke quotes from Isaiah 40:4-5. This is an explicit passage prophesying of the Forerunner and his ministry.
 - i. The structure of 4-6.
 - 1. V. 4 speaks of the Forerunner himself. He’d be as one coming from the wilderness with a unique message for a unique purpose—to make ready the way of the Christ.
 - 2. V. 5 is poetic wilderness imagery that describes the function of the Forerunners message and ministry – to address the heart and cause repentance.
 - 3. V. 6 is speaking of salvation, which will come through the Messiah, but v. 6 can only happen after v. 5.
 - 4. As a result, the role of John is to prepare the heart so that it might be able to receive the salvation of the Messiah.
 - ii. The wilderness imagery of the heart (5).
 - 1. “*Every ravine shall be filled up*” – speaks of that which is base and low.

2. *“Every hill shall be brought low”* – speaks of pride and that which needs to be brought low.
3. *“The crooked shall become straight”* – speaks of that which is twisted and deceptive.
4. *“All roads shall be made smooth”* – speaks of the stumbling blocks and obstacles within the heart.

iii. The role of John would be to open the heart, lay it bare, and expose it for what it is. As a result, before salvation can happen, a person must understand the nature of their own heart. Without an exposure of the heart, repentance can't happen. And if repentance can't happen, then salvation is impossible. Salvation must begin with repentance.

4. The Message (7-9).

- a. Repentance (μετάνοια) means to “change one’s mind.”
 - i. You’re changing your mind, first about God, then about yourself.
 - ii. It is to then turn from one direction and head to another. You’re turning from self and sin toward God and holiness.
 - iii. What is essential when it comes to repentance is to understand that it’s always an issue of the mind. Repentance has less to do with action and more to do with being convinced of something. This new conviction (or understanding), as a result of a changed mind, will always lead to changes in action. However, the changed mind/heart must come first.
- b. John sees the people are not truly repentant, but pursuing false approaches to attain the forgiveness of sin.
 - i. They’re described as a “brood of vipers.”
 1. The image here is of baby snakes fleeing from fire, where fire is the wrath to come. As such, they head to the water (i.e., baptism) for safety.
 2. The reference to baby snakes also means John is calling them offspring of Satan—the Serpent of old.

- a. He's making a contrast with their desire to call Abraham their father (v. 8).
 - b. As such, the true father of unrepentant sinners is Satan (c.f., 1John 5:10).
 - c. Again, John is seeking to utterly expose the heart. They're relying on external means for salvation, but John's trying to get them to understand that externals can't deal with the internal.
- ii. John then exposes their *method* of salvation on two accounts.
 - 1. Baptism (7).
 - 2. Ancestral bloodline (8b).
- c. The command – “bear fruits in keeping with repentance (8a).”
 - i. It's a command designed to expose.
 - ii. His goal is help them see their own heart—that they're religious, but fruitless.
- d. The Axe of Judgment (9).
 - i. The immediate context is speaking of what's soon to happen regarding the nation of Israel.
 - ii. He's emphasizing certain realities associated with the New Covenant – that each person is held individually responsible before God. Notice the individual nature of the terms (e.g., trees, every tree, etc.).

5. Conclusion.

- a. The mark of a true believer is always a heart of repentance.
- b. The mark of true repentance is a life that bears fruit in keeping with that repentance.

Small Group Question

1. Why does Luke begin chapter 3 the way he does (i.e., names, titles, etc.)?
2. Why did John preach the message he did?
3. What does “repentance” mean?
4. According to John, what’s the mark of true repentance? Is this true for your life? And how do you know?
5. What are some areas in your life for which repentance needs to happen? Where have you perhaps been playing fast and loose with sin, presuming upon the grace and mercy of God?