

# Preparing our Hearts for the Kingdom of God - Rev. Callum Macleod (Retired)

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn together now to the Gospel according to Luke at chapter 3, and we can read at verse 3. Luke chapter 3 at verse 3.

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, is prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight, and so on down through the following verses.

Now, as we journey on through life, some events are life-changing. They can be life-changing in a personal way, but they can also be life-changing in the wider society kind of way, and perhaps also life-changing for the world in which we live.

These days, there is so much conversation about what the Chancellor will say in the next budget. There's a lot of speculation. There's a lot of waiting, wondering what will happen, and perhaps whatever will happen, it's going to change our lives in a particular way.

When we read this story here in the Gospel according to Luke, there is something life-changing taking place. As we noted with the children's address, there has been years, centuries of waiting for this moment.

[ 1 : 29 ] And we can imagine, perhaps, the people of God down through these centuries, wondering what God meant when he spoke to David, wondering what God meant when he spoke to Isaiah, and told him about the virgin that was going to have a child and call his name Emmanuel.

We can imagine the conversations amongst the people of God as they waited for these things to happen. But here now, these things are at last happening.

Sechariah was in the temple. He was doing the routine thing. And all of a sudden, the angel of the Lord spoke to him and announced that the moment had come.

It was life-changing for Sechariah. It was going to be life-changing for Mary. It was going to be life-changing for the people of God. It is life-changing for ourselves.

And at the center of what they were doing and waiting, and at the center of what they must now do on the announcement of the arrival of Jesus, is the whole idea of preparation.

[ 2 : 40 ] And preparation is so important in every aspect of life. For preparation, we need self-discipline. For preparation, we need some careful forethought.

We need to think ahead of what we are going to do. And once we have decided on these things, then we have to keep on the task every day, looking forward and preparing ourselves for the whole purpose of our preparation.

It takes our energy. It takes our intellect. It takes our heart and our choices. It takes our time to prepare ourselves for the whole purpose of our actions.

It takes our time to prepare ourselves for our actions. And that is something of what is happening in the story here, as we arrive here, and in the message of Luke, and in the message of John the Baptist. And today we want to think of preparing our hearts for the kingdom of God.

And at verse number 2, that's where we see John proclaiming. He's proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and he is doing so in the wilderness and in the region around Jordan.

[ 4 : 00 ] And when the Bible is telling us that he is in the region around Jordan and that he is in the wilderness, it's making a connection between what God is doing in the days of John the Baptist and what God was doing in the lives of the people of God in the Old Testament and in the Exodus.

We remember that God took the children of Israel out of Egypt, the Exodus. He took them to Mount Sinai, and he took them to the wilderness. And here, God is doing the same thing.

In other words, he's in many ways fulfilling what he did in a symbolic way in the history of the Old Testament people of God. So, he is now fulfilling it in the ministry of John the Baptist.

And the prophet Hosea speaks of the way in which God is going to bless his people. I will take her to the wilderness. I will allure her.

There's a drawing. There's a powerful work of God going to take place in the wilderness, drawing people to himself. And here, John is preparing, asking them to prepare for a baptism of repentance.

[ 5 : 15 ] His message is based on something external and something internal. And the external thing is that he is preaching to them baptism.

It's that visible right that John himself introduced. It's a right that speaks to us of devotion to a particular cause.

If we think of baptism literally and where the word has come from in the original language, it speaks to us of taking a garment, dipping it into a trough full of dye, and taking the garment out on the other side in a different color.

And so, baptism speaks to us about that external change in life. We're coming as though the people that we were, and we're coming through this process of baptism.

And when we come through on the other side of it, we are baptized and our lives are never the same ever again. It's external. It's visible. And when our baptism today, when it's serious and sincere, our life after our baptism is entirely different to our lives before baptism, because now there is direction in life, now there is motion in our life, there is a person to be followed, there is a path to be followed.

[ 6 : 40 ] There is that external thing. But it is a baptism of repentance. And that baptism of repentance takes everything to my whole inner being, my intellect, the things that I think, the way that I think, my heart, the things that I choose, and the way that I choose.

It is a repentance that speaks of changing my mind, going in a different direction, because I don't like that direction anymore. I don't like the objects of my focus in going that direction.

So I turn around and I'm going in a new direction. And the whole of the Old Testament from Isaiah onwards is about the people of God hearing the summons of God to return, to repent, to turn around.

They have turned their backs upon God, and God is reaching out to them, asking them to turn around and to come back to Him. And for them to do that visible turning around, there's a process that goes on in their minds and in their hearts.

And we are here today to worship God. And the God whom we worship is speaking to us through these words, and the gospel that is being proclaimed to us is calling us to this baptism, calling us to this repentance, calling us for our lives to change for the better and forevermore.

[ 8 : 19 ] And it's important as we go forward into the rest of this message to recognize and to understand that the external alone is never enough, that what I am visibly to others is never enough.

The visible, the external, has to have underlying it what takes place in my heart. And then the above turn in my life is because my heart has changed.

Called to change, called to turn around, called to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and to be His disciple. And John and Luke places that call upon the people around him into the context of what God has said in the Old Testament and this great statement that we have in verse 4, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make us paths straight.

We're back to the idea of preparation. God wants them to be ready.

God wants you and I today to be ready. There is a work that we can do in order to prepare for the salvation of God.

[ 9 : 49 ] And here it is described for us from the words of Isaiah, prepare the way of the Lord, make us 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.

The picture is one of the Old Testament and people preparing for the king to come and visit. And when the king is coming to visit, there is preparation.

There must be a highway for the king. And in thinking of that idea of highway, in kind of literal natural terms, we can think of a great civil engineering project.

If we travel down the A9 in recent times, there is the great project of joining the A9 from Perth to Inverness. And as you drive down, you see the massive amount of work that's taking place. The clearing of trees, the removal of hills, the filling of hollows, the drawing of straight lines. It's a great project. And here the Bible likens that kind of project to the things that you and I have to do in preparation for the kingdom of God.

[ 11 : 17 ] And we can think of two of these things. First of all, that there are gaps in your life that must be filled.

Every valley, says Isaiah and says Luke here, every valley shall be filled. There are things missing in our lives.

And part of the things that God is looking for in our lives is to be here to worship the Lord on the Lord's day. But that must be accompanied with a life that brings my worship from the worship of the people of God into every area of my life so that my life is worship.

And by that, I don't mean that I'm going to spend seven days a week doing nothing but physically worshipping God. But the rest of my life is worship in the sense that whatever I do, not only do I do it under the eye of God, but I do it with a view to the glory of God.

And so, throughout the whole of my week in my home, in my workplace, in my school life, in my recreation, I'm under the watchful eye of God and I'm doing all that I do in order to please God.

[ 12 : 39 ] And that doesn't mean to say that I have no pleasure in it or find no pleasure in it. If I'm doing what God wants me to do, then there is real pleasure in doing that beyond any other pleasure.

But you and I today have to ask ourselves, what are the gaps in our lives? If we're looking to the worship of God and to the blessing of God and for the salvation of God, what are the gaps? What do you need to put in place? And along with that, there are the things that have to be removed.

Every mountain and hill shall be made low. There are likely obstacles in your life today to the blessing of God being enjoyed by you.

I refer to the dueling of the A9 and the time spent in blowing lumps of rock and hills and blowing into boots and spreading them, taking them away from where they are so that they are no longer an obstacle.

[ 13 : 55 ] And sometimes in our own personal lives, we need some kind of explosive to simply be planted at the bottom of the greatest obstacles in our lives to the blessing of God so that these obstacles will be blown out of the way and so that I will see where I am going and what is on the other side of that mountain and so that God can come into my life on the highway that is now prepared with His help and by His grace.

And you and I today have got to consider not just the gaps in our lives, perhaps the biggest problem in our lives are the obstacles, the obstacles to the coming of God.

There is the great promise here that if we do all the filling of the gaps, if we do all of the removal of the obstacles, then the lines are straight, the rough places become level ways and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

Sometimes there is nothing more annoying than sitting somewhere and you are watching something, whether it is a film or a performance, and in front of you there is a pillar or in front of you there is somebody twice your size and you cannot see what you want to see.

And you would do anything to clear the way so that your vision is clear of the object that you want to admire and to listen to or whatever it is. So it is in the life of God's children and the life of the children of the kingdom of God that until the obstacles go, then life is not going to change.

[ 15 : 53 ] They block out the light. They block out the beauty. They block out everything that God shines through the passion of Jesus and we cannot see until they are removed.

So we have to ask ourselves today, what are the things that we need to bring into our lives? What are the things that we need to put out of our lives in order for the way to be clear?

And I think as we move on, it's also fair to say that what John is saying here and what Luke is saying here doesn't apply only to those who are not yet saved.

That there may be times in our Christian experience when the highway on which God comes into our hearts with His blessing and with His favor, when the road becomes overgrown because we haven't kept the way clear.

There is no traffic there and so the blessing of God is missing in my life because I haven't watched carefully the road that was prepared for God to come in the first place.

[ 17 : 06 ] And sometimes that can be really serious. There are a number of roads. There's the right, I'll be thankful, I think it's called, and regularly there are landslides.

The road is closed because of the landslide. And sometimes in our Christian experience, there are landslides and things around us pour into the highway on which God comes into our lives.

And once that happens, the road is closed. I cannot see God. I cannot get near to God. And something serious has to happen.

There has to be a major operation that's organized by those who are able to clear the path. And so in that situation, I'm dependent upon the grace of God with the engineering power of His Holy Spirit and His grace in my life to remove this great landslide from the road so that at last the blessing of God will be restored.

If I'm not a Christian today, let me fill the gaps. let me remove the obstacles. If I am a Christian today, let me make sure that the path remains clear.

[ 18 : 32 ] And if it is not clear, let's make sure that the necessary work takes place to reopen the highway and so that the blessing of God will refill our lives and so that we will have the peace and the blessing of God.

There is that preparation. Secondly, there is participation.

And participation is about truly and really being part of God's kingdom. And John senses immediately when the crowds gather with him, he senses immediately that some of them are not sincere.

And he wants to put his finger, or point his finger at those who have come and are putting on this show of coming to hear his message and to be baptized.

He wants to challenge them. He wants to push them to examine themselves to make sure that they're coming with the right motive and for the right reason.

[ 19 : 49 ] And he uses that statement in verse 7, which you and I would probably never use in addressing anyone else in verse 7, you brood of vipers, you're like a group of snakes, you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come.

He describes him as vipers. Jesus described the Jews as those who were of your father the devil because they rejected him. It's a similar description.

He's talking to those who are not changed in their hearts, who are not sincere in their coming, who are focusing on the external things and asking them who told you to flee from the wrath to come.

There's been a warning. They've heeded the warning and they've come here. But have the gaps been filled? Have the mountains been removed?

It's the highway there that's the challenge. And that's why he says to them in the following verse, 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.

[ 21 : 16 ] Bring forth fruit. I read at the beginning of the Bible that God created the trees and the plants and the vegetation and the trees had their fruit and their seed was in them and they all bore fruit according to their kind.

Apple trees and apples, pear trees and pear trees, apple trees and not strawberries. They bear fruit according to their kind.

And God is saying here that there is a fruit that belongs to repentance. It works itself out. It's the kind of fruit that speaks of the work of God in their hearts and it's the kind of fruit that is confirmation of the genuineness of what has taken place in their hearts.

Bear forth fruit and keeping with repentance. What I'm doing must correspond to the definition of repentance.

My life should correspond to this. The idea of keeping with repentance is the whole idea of tipping the scales or the old fashioned sense of having balances.

[ 22 : 46 ] So here are the balances and here is what repentance is. It's a hate it for sin. It's a turning from it to God. It's a striving, it's a searching for the mercy and the grace of God.

Here is what repentance is like. I place all of these things on the scales and the scales go right down of course. But then I take the fruit that is in my own life and what my own life looks like and I place it on the other half of the scales.

And when I do so then the scales should be balanced. If I haven't filled the gaps there will be an imbalance. imbalance. If I haven't removed the obstacles there will be an imbalance. The fruit simply is not there. This must equal that. This must show itself like that. And the challenge for you and for me today is to go and live life with a sense of repentance that is described in Paul's second letter to Corinthians as the godly grief that produces repentance. It grows out of love for God and the fear of God and love for the Lord Jesus. That's what brings about the change. Without that in our hearts then whatever the external might look like it won't correspond to the repentance that the Bible speaks of that is at the very center of a new relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

[ 24 : 32 ] Being in the balances. Go and weigh yourselves says John to the gathered audience. Go and place yourself in the balances.

See what your life is real like in the light of what I'm saying to you. And that's part of the challenge of the word of God for ourselves today. To think of what God is saying and to go away and to do the measurements.

To go away and to do the preparation. To go away and to do the working. And what was the main obstacle to their participation?

Strikingly it was their whole religious life. And they needed to come face to face with that. And sometimes for ourselves the greatest obstacle to our salvation is the religious life that we live and the basis on which we live that religious life.

That's what John is saying to them in the middle of verse number eight. Do not begin to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father.

[ 25 : 54 ] Ah, that's the claim. That's my pathway to be the child of God. That's my pathway to be part of God's kingdom. Abraham is my father.

He is the father of the faithful. God called Abraham. God gave great promises to Abraham. And the Bible makes it clear that those who are the children of faith are the children of Abraham.

That is very true. But they missed the point that those who are the children of Abraham, they are the children of God's promise.

And they are the children not because they belong to Abraham. Abraham had Isaac and Ishmael. And in Isaac will your seed be called.

And they based their right and their claim to the kingdom of God simply on the fact that they could trace their genealogy right the way back to Abraham.

[ 26 : 58 ] When you read the book of Chronicles and the Old Testament and the people of God have come back from Babylon, one of the first things that they did was to write the genealogy of the people who had returned to show to them that they were connected to the promises of God given to Abraham.

That was the means of encouragement to them. But it shows to us the way in which the way God wants to encourage us can be misunderstood, can be misapplied, and can lead us going down the wrong path and the path away from salvation.

And today for you and me as much as it is precious to have Christian parents and Christian grandparents and Christian families great gifts from God.

I cannot and you cannot say today that I'm a Christian because my father is or was or because my mother is or was or my grandfather or my grandmother there is no such progression in the kingdom of God.

Marvelously at times it looks as if there is because God blesses families with the grace of salvation and we see Christian families a great blessing.

[ 28 : 25 ] But no matter how young or old we are we are not in the kingdom of God because of our parents we are there because of the grace of God. God says John is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

In participating in the kingdom of God let's not be confused by our religion let's ensure that our participation in the life of the church of Christ in the world is based on our understanding of the salvation that is by grace alone and not by my works by grace alone and not because of who I am or who my parents are I come because of the grace of God that God is able to bring life from the lifeless that is able to resurrect and create new things and create for himself children and briefly as we close there is also the perspective what else should force us today if we need to be forced what should force us today to consider the preparation and to consider how we can participate it is the

proximity the closeness of the judgment of

God and in these very verses John wants to impress that upon them in verse 9 even now the now is significant it's not tomorrow it's not next week it's not next year it's now he wants them to understand that if God is close in his kingdom and sending his son and sending John the Baptist to prepare the way if God is close in his salvation he is close in his judgment that 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 the axe is laid to the root of the tree they're asked to bring forth fruits in keeping worthy of repentance and here is a perspective for them to take away with them and to think of everything that they are the judgment of

God the axe is laid it's the passive of the verb it's God who has laid the axe here it's the judgment of God and every tree that does not bear fruit the fruit of repentance trees shall be known by their fruit says the Lord Jesus and so you and I will be known by your fruit and the judgment of God is close and we need to live our lives carefully because of the importance of participating in the kingdom of God and having the life of the children of God and we need to live our life carefully because the judgment of God is around the corner and the axe that is at the root of the tree is ready to cut the tree down and life must come to an end and then there is the thought of the final judgment of God let's not lose sight of the eternal perspective that must be around us and over us every Lord's day that we worship here every day that we open our eyes that's the perspective and because of that I need to prepare because I must participate and enjoy the kingdom of God and all of its grace and all of its salvation and all of its triumphant march through this world into the everlasting kingdom of God and may God help us to prepare may bless us so that we truly participate and may we wait with anticipation for the day when he will gather people to be with himself and be saved from the judgment of God which is an option that is not only undesirable but that is surely unthinkable may [ 33 : 25 ] God bless his word! Let us pray most gracious God we bow before you and we acknowledge our great need of you you are the God who prepares a people for yourself and whilst we recognise our responsibilities before you today we pray that you will help us with your grace that we may walk in your ways that our hearts may be prepared by you and that you may come and dwell with us and be your God and so bless your word to us as we have shared in it guide us throughout the rest of this day may we remember the things that you have said to us and may we carry these things into our lives and may our lives be changed as a result by the power and influence of your Holy Spirit from day to day we do pray hear us and accept us and bless your word for Jesus sake Amen the glory psalm is psalm number 85 and sing psalms on page 113 and we're singing at verse number 8 to the end of the psalm psalm 85 page 113 at verse 8

I will hear what God the Lord says to the saints he offers peace but his people must not wonder and return to foolishness to the end of the psalm to God's praise I will hear what God the Lord says to his saints he offers peace but his people must not wander and return to foolishness surely for all those who fear him his salvation is a time so that once again his glory may be seen within our land! love and truth have met together righteousness! righteousness and peace embrace! righteousness righteousness! righteousness lurks down from heaven from the earth springs faithfulness!

What is good the Lord will give us and our land its fruit will bear!

[ 36 : 56 ] Righteousness will go before him and his royal way prepare!

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever more Amen