

Preparing the Way

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[0 : 00] Please take seats. And you should have been handed the passage, which has also got an outline on the other side of where we're going today, which will help. To begin, I'd like to play a little game.

I don't know about you, but I love quiz shows. In my opinion, the best quiz show was Sale of the Century. Do you remember that? Or as it used to be called, Sale of the Century.

Here is a Sale of the Century type question straight from Sunday school. So, who am I? I was born 2,000 years ago in a town of Judea.

My birth was prophesied in the Old Testament and then later announced by angels. People everywhere flocked to hear my teaching, but I was ultimately put to death by the Roman authorities.

It was said of me that among those born of women, there is no one greater. I'm not going to ask you who you think it is because you might ruin it, but it does sound like Jesus, doesn't it?

[1 : 00] It does sound like the answer is Jesus, but actually all of that is the Bible's description of John the Baptist. Have a look at verse 1 in your handouts there.

Luke mentions the Caesar, the Roman governor, governor, some other local bigwigs just to get to John.

If we were trying to guess the greatest regular person ever, we might say Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela. But Jesus comes in over the top and says, among those born of women, there is none greater than John.

You see, God used to speak all the time in the Old Testament, but then one day he went quiet and for the past 400 years there was silence.

Can you imagine that 400 years of silence? Imagine it was the year 1620, God speaking and then suddenly silence. Is that awkward now?

[2 : 19] Well, that's what it was like for 400 years until all of a sudden, verse 2, the word of God came to John. We, in this room, we call John the Baptist, but the Old Testament calls him the voice.

Have a look at verse 4. 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.

And the way to think of John is like a siren. Sirens are loud. They get your attention. And so is John, because he is preparing the way for people to meet the Lord when he arrives.

According to the voice, the preparation we need is verse 3. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

See, that's what people need to do if they're to meet the Christ safely. When John's birth was announced, the angel said that John would turn the hearts of people back to God.

[3 : 28] And that is literally what repentance means. Turning away from your old life, doing a 180 degree back to God. Water baptism, which John brought about.

Water baptism is just a way to symbolize repentance. You're dunked in the water. It expresses to God, expresses to everyone around that you want to be washed from your old way of life.

Live new back to God. And actually, in our passage, it's more than just the people who are preparing themselves. The whole earth, in fact, does a sort of 180 degree turn.

Verse 5. The valleys, they stand up out of respect. The mountains, they do the polite thing. They lower themselves. They bow down. The crooked roads, they become straight.

The rough ways, they become smooth. You see, that is just how a good creation responds when its creator comes by. Verse 6.

[4 : 28] All people will see God's salvation. Jesus is coming. It will be a global event. Prepare yourself, is John's message. Be warned, he says.

See, that is the point of a siren, isn't it? There's strong judgment language in this passage. It's hard to get away from. John calls the people, verse 7, a brood of vipers.

Which is, I mean, that's clearly not a compliment, is it? Imagine if Annette stood up this morning and said, good morning, you brood of vipers. That would be quite a way to say hello. So, John says that people need to flee the coming wrath.

He talks about axes and fire. He wants us to be warned about meeting Jesus unrepentantly. And he's not afraid to use shock tactics in his delivery.

You see, sirens are harsh to our ears, but it's only so that they'll be heard clearly. So, John says, verse 8, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

[5 : 32] You see, farmers only plant trees so they'll produce fruit. Pretty obvious stuff. And just as it's not enough for a tree to, you know, look the part with branches and leaves and not produce fruit, so it is with God's people.

It's no good to say sorry with religious rituals, say sorry on a Sunday, and not produce the fruit of a changed effort towards God, a changed life towards God.

Shock tactic, verse 9, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down, thrown into the fire. John says, please don't think, you Jews, please don't think that because Abraham is your greatest grandfather that you'll be in the family.

Shock tactic? Verse 9, for I tell you that out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham. You see, the Jews loved religious rituals.

John is worried that they'll treat his baptism like just another ritual to add to their CV. That would not be good enough when Jesus arrives.

[6 : 42] John says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Don't just say sorry. Say sorry and show that you're trying to live for God. Don't rely on religious connections and rituals.

Don't think that will make you okay when Jesus arrives. He prepares the way by shaking people up from a false sense of certainty about what God is like.

The message seems to be getting through, verse 10. What should we do? The crowd asks. And this is our second point. Verse 11, John begins to answer. He says, anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none.

Anyone who has food should do the same. Tax collectors, soldiers, don't lie. Don't cheat people. And to be honest, verse 11 to 14 are not rocket science. They're very basic loving your neighbor stuff.

Actually, it was common sense stuff in the Old Testament too. Isaiah 58, which Annette brought us earlier. Isaiah says, don't do religious rituals on Sunday and then not give your neighbor any bread and think that God will somehow be happy with you.

[7 : 51] John, he might as well have put a copy of the Old Testament in front of their faces and said, have you guys even bothered to read this? How about listening to the way God wants you to live?

It's a clear message all the way through. And as we in this room think about how this applies to us, I want us to think about a wrong sense of certainty.

That might be how we are the same as the Jews. And even as we start to think about that as an application, some of you in the room with a tender conscience might already be worried that you're no longer Christians.

But the warning of this passage is not against poor repentance. So, you know, we do something wrong and then we have to repent. We try hard, but we do something wrong again.

And we have to repent. We try really hard, but we keep failing again and again and again. That is actually just part of the Christian life. This is not for the convicted person who tries hard, but keeps failing to live for God.

[8 : 55] This is a warning for complacent person who thinks whatever they've done this summer, whatever they've done in their lives, it doesn't really matter because they've got a free ticket to heaven in their back pocket.

And that free ticket to heaven, it might be that they were baptized too. It might be that they were baptized by some really high, you know, highfalutin Anglican. It might be that they go to church. Maybe it's because they read the Bible or they've got a relative who's a minister.

Perhaps it's because they saw Billy Graham himself, you know, back in Melbourne in 19, whenever it was. John wants to give complacent person some shock therapy, as it were.

If our certainty with God rests on any religious thing, while at the same time there's no evidence that we're trying hard to live for him, that is a dangerous place to be in.

The warning of this passage is not poor repentance. The warning is unrepentance. That we just don't care whether we sin anymore.

[10 : 02] As we enter 2021, convicted person is already thinking about how they're going to work hard to live for God this year. Already thinking about sins on their mind that they're going to battle.

That is a good lot of evidence that you're repentant, that you're trying to live for God. Even though we'll fail every day, the good news is you have a savior.

Jesus is for you. Complacent person needs to realize the urgency of this siren before Jesus arrives. It might happen this year.

Complacent person needs to realize the urgency. Speaking of urgency, I think the reason why verse 1 and 2 have all those historical details isn't just about precision and certainty.

I think they're a time marker of urgency. You see, the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar meant that it was exactly 29 AD. And that means the world has had 2,000 years of the Baptist message.

[11 : 07] Convicted person? He'll realize that therefore we're 2,000 years closer to the arrival of the king. And so we better get repentance sorted.

We better try hard to live for God. Complacent person will think, 2,000 years? What's a few decades more? Maybe I'll take this John stuff seriously when I'm on my deathbed.

And if that's the case, I don't think complacent person really understands sirens very well. See, sirens are loud, so they rise above the noise of the city.

Sirens are harsh to the ears, so they get your attention. Sirens are urgent in their sound because they warn us of the imminent danger. Verse 7, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

Verse 9, the axe is already at the root of the trees. Verse 1, in 29 AD, the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, the word of God came to John.

[12 : 12] A message of repentance has already been spread in the world when John started speaking. And given everything that John has said, that harsh message, would you have been eager to go out into the wilderness to hear him that day, like those people were?

Would you be eager to hear him again and again and again? I know repentance is not new for anyone in this room. Back then, verse 15, the people, they were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah.

That's understandable, isn't it, given the nature of what John is saying? But John doesn't hesitate to set them straight about who he is and who the Messiah is.

Verse 16, this is our third point. John answered them all, I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I will come. The strap of his sandals I'm not worthy to untie.

He will baptize you with water, with the Holy Spirit and fire. And some of these illustrations are quite shocking, shock tactics. I think the sandal one is shocking in a barefoot culture.

[13 : 25] Imagine the heat of the desert, no sealed roads, everyone's wearing sandals. The lowest job you give to the lowest servant is to deal with the visitor's feet.

John is the special one, we said. Among those born of women, none is greater. But not even John is worthy to be the lowest of the low servants for the mighty one, the Lord Jesus.

He's not even worthy to be his cleaner. I baptize you with water, says John, but Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit baptism is a promise from Ezekiel, Ezekiel 36.

That is where God will give people new hearts when he puts his spirit within them. The spirit will cause us to live God's way, to walk in his word.

In other words, it's like washing our hearts to be like new. That is what Jesus can do for us. John says, all I can do is dunk you on the outside, just like a symbol.

[14 : 29] For Jesus, he'll bring a great division of people. Verse 17. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn.

But he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. There will be a great gathering of convicted people towards Jesus. They'll be like wheat or like, you know, like fruit, like we said before.

But for complacent people, I can't think of another way to say it. He will come with fire. That's as clear as the text is. We're not really, I don't think any of us are farmers.

Rupert's a farmer. But you don't have to be a farmer to understand the seriousness of the illustrations in this passage. You see, if I asked you if a siren is a good sound or bad, it depends on whose side you're on, doesn't it?

A siren, a police siren is a great sound if you know you need saving. But it's a terrible sound if you're doing the wrong thing. If you haven't given your life to Christ or if you think you'll be okay in judgment without him, let me push this siren illustration.

[15 : 42] You need to turn yourself in. When you go to the courts, you won't get a judge. You'll get a saviour. In fact, your saviour, Jesus, will take the judgment for you.

In other words, be convicted and not complacent about John's message today. On Wednesday night, that summer Bible studies, Peter Adam, he spoke so well on Hebrews, and he said quite a similar thing.

He kept saying, don't drift, but draw near. Don't drift, but draw near. He kept saying it over and over again, and drifting is very similar to complacency. I think they're one and the same thing.

And he said something else on Wednesday that was very chilling, and I had to speak to him about it afterwards. I don't know if you picked it up. He said that in the book of Hebrews, people who drift, that is, complacent people, they start out just sort of complacent and drifting, but by the end of the book of Hebrews, they end up as God's enemies.

That is a very chilling thing to say. And I think that's why the passage ends with a look at Herod. You see, Herod, I think, is the last ditch effort to warn complacent people that they'll end up like God's enemies.

[16 : 59] Look at verse 19. 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. And on one hand, Herod might have thought he'd won. He shut up John, that annoying but truthful siren. And now he can get back to his regular life.

But we all look at Herod in dismay because we know that that was Herod's only chance of salvation. And what did he do? He locked it up in prison. So we never had to hear it anymore.

My sister-in-law, she came down from Sydney over the Christmas break to spend some time with us. And we were having a chat. And she told me, she's a Christian, we were talking about some stuff.

And she said that in her office, one of the clients of her firm gave one of her colleagues a Bible because the client was a Christian. And he gave the colleagues a Bible as a thank you for some of their business dealings.

[18 : 02] I thought that's quite a bold witness to bring a Bible into the business world. But anyway, he brought a Bible. And what that started in the office, my sister-in-law said, was a game as to whose bin the Bible would go in.

And, you know, the office joke was that no one even wanted to have the Bible in their bins. They were so annoyed and offended by the Bible. And so they threw the Bible out, you know, out of the door.

And my sister-in-law, she was quite dismayed and distressed by the whole thing because she's the only Christian in her office. But we can see what that office full of Herod's can't.

That that word might be the closest any of them will ever come to salvation. And they laughed at it.

And they threw it away and they threw it in the bin the same way Herod locked up John. So they never had to hear it. John himself is going to pretty much step off the pages of Luke's gospel pretty much.

[19 : 03] Jesus, adult Jesus, will finally take over next week. But John's message will form the pattern of Christian ministry for 2,000 years.

Even Jesus himself, before he goes up to heaven, at the very end of Luke's gospel, he says, be like John. He says, all disciples should proclaim repentance for the forgiveness of sins in my name to all nations.

And like John, he says, don't draw attention to yourselves, but keep pointing people back to Jesus. That is how we prepare the way for people to meet the king when he arrives.

Last week, we spoke about salvation business. Annette mentioned it at the top of the service. I reckon being like John is the salvation business servants should be busy with when the master comes and finds us.

I reckon that is a great thing to do. It's not easy for churches and Christians. We get consumed, if you're anything like me, get consumed by politics, the state of the world, all that sort of business, religious rituals, your favorite preachers, all that sort of stuff.

[20 : 12] Let's be a church, at the very least, like John, who points people to Jesus, the strap of whose sandals none of us are worthy to go near. Let's call attention to repentance for the forgiveness of sins, having new hearts that are able to live God's way because of his spirits.

I realize some people here might be looking for new churches, that sort of business, people watching us at home online. Please join a church that points people to Jesus, that talks about repentance for the forgiveness of sins in his name, that tries hard to live for him because they've been washed clean inside by the Holy Spirit.

That's what we're going to do at this church for this year, for every year, God willing. We're going to work hard at that. We're not always good at everything. We do fail. We're coming out of hibernation.

The staff team will need the help of convicted people in this salvation business. And so we need your help and we're going to God's help. And so we're going to pray. Do join me.

Father God, we thank you that you tell us the truth. We thank you for John. We're so grateful for his ministry, for the offer of repentance for forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name.

[21 : 39] What a precious gift that is. Your spirit in us. May we never get over this, Father. And please, would we be busy like John, pointing people to Jesus?

Would repentance for forgiveness of sins be always on our lips in this church, in our lives? And Father, help us not to be complacent person. Help us not to rely on religious stuff, but always on a life lived hard for you and on the blood of the Lord Jesus given for us.

We pray these things in your name. Amen.