Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Setting the Stage for Jesus, Part 3
Scripture: Luke 3:3
Code: 42-37

We have the opportunity in our Sunday morning services to be going through the gospel of Luke as he records the story of the Lord Jesus Christ. And this morning we're going to be looking at Luke chapter 3 again. So much of what is in the beginning of this gospel is foundational and formative that it does take us some time to get through it. But it establishes so many critical premises for the unfolding of the story of Christ that we are in no way hurrying, as you well know.

I want you to look at Luke chapter 3 again, and we've begun to address the opening verses of this wonderful chapter and the opening verses of this chapter look at John, the prophet, who was sent from God to announce the arrival of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the Jewish people had for centuries waited for the coming of their promised Messiah. They had waited long for the Savior, the One who would bring them salvation, who would bring them blessing, who would fulfill all the promises made to the fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all the promises made to...to David, all the promises made to and through the prophets, particularly Isaiah, and then Ezekiel, and Jeremiah. And the people were, at this point, wearied with the waiting. Many centuries had gone by and they had been beleaguered by a succession of Gentile, idolatrous oppressors, by internal turmoil, by apostate religion, by relentless and seemingly fruitless rituals. But the time for the coming of Messiah had finally arrived in God's plan and before the Messiah comes to begin His ministry, about six months ahead of His arrival on the scene, God sends the last and greatest of the Old Testament prophets, this man named John, to announce Messiah's arrival and to prepare the people for His coming.

Back in chapter 1, you remember, Zacharias, an old priest married to Elizabeth, went in to minister at the temple. While he was ministering in the temple, it says in verse 11, an angel of the Lord came to him right there by the altar of incense, and the angel in verse 13 said to him that he shouldn't be afraid because his prayer had been heard. He and his wife had prayed for a child. They were barren and the prayer was now heard. "You will bear a son," said the angel, "you'll give him the name John. You will have joy and gladness and many will rejoice at his birth for he will be great in the sight of the Lord." Verse 15, "Drink no wine or liquor, be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb, he will turn back many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God and it is he who will go as a

forerunner before the Messiah in the spirit and power of that great prophet Elijah. He will turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord," or for the Messiah.

So, old Zacharias is told he's going to have a son and the son is going to be named John. He'll be a prophet and his task will be to prepare the people for the arrival of the Messiah. When months later the child was born, on the eighth day they had the special naming and circumcising ceremony and Zacharias refer...referred to this prophecy in chapter 1 verse 76, holding the baby in his arms he says, "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High for you will go on before the Lord to prepare His ways." And that is exactly what we find being detailed for us in chapter 3.

Thirty years have now passed and it is time for John the prophet to step out of the private life into the public realm. It is time for the Messiah to come. It is time for His arrival to be announced by this last and greatest of all Old Testament prophets.

So, as John steps center stage in the drama of redemption, the work of Christ is really set in motion. And as I've been pointing out to you over the last number of weeks, as Messiah came He came at a time of great desperation in Israel. I guess summing it up we could say idolaters were ruling over Israel and their own priesthood and religion had become corrupt. It was the darkest of times, far from the hopes of promise and covenant made in the Old Testament to the fathers and to David, and even to the prophets, who had been promised a New Covenant of forgiveness and a new heart and internal blessing as well as knowledge and peace. All of that seemed very far away and very remote. It was the darkest of times but it was the darkest of night before the dawn.

Now the key thing to note here is at the end of verse 2, where it says "The word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness." He had been in the wilderness as chapter 1 verse 80 says, for all of the thirty years of his life. He was a...basically alienated from society, from politics, and from religion. He was a prophet of God. He was a true believer in Jehovah. He knew his role and he knew his responsibility. We don't know anything about his ministry over those thirty years but we do know that at this point the word of the Lord, which constitutes the call into his public ministry, comes to him and he steps center stage in the drama of redemption to announce the arrival of Messiah and to ready the people for His coming.

Well in order for us to understand this great moment, the greatest of moments as of yet in redemptive history, Luke the historian gives us four settings to help us set the scene: Historical setting, geographical setting, theological setting, and prophetical setting and we get that in the opening six

verses. And I...I say this again to you, it takes some time to unfold this, it's...and the writer knows that. I mean, when Luke wrote this he knew down through the years that these names and these places and these brief statements about theology and these references to prophecy would...would literally call an expanded discussion because we would have to shape all of that into its understanding to provide the framework...its full understanding to provide the framework for the arrival of John and Jesus.

Now we have already looked at the historical setting, and all four of these are like threads woven together to create a tapestry that acts as a backdrop to the arrival of John and Jesus. But we'll look at the historical setting just briefly. We've gone over it before, but in verse 1 and in the first part of verse 2 you have seven names. In verse 1 are five Gentile names, Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. These indicate to us that Gentiles dominated the land of Palestine. It was supposed to be God's land, but here were pagan, idolatrous Gentiles ruling in that land. It had been quartered into four sections and there were four petty rulers there. One was the prefect, Pontius Pilate, who was placed there by the Roman government over the...the most populated area which was Judea and Samaria and included Jerusalem. And then there was Herod and there was Philip, who were sons of Herod the Great, who had died and originally left the four sections to his four sons. And then there was a man named Lysanias, who was the petty ruler over an area called Abilene in the north.

Now what this tells us is that basically idolaters dominated the land that belonged to Jehovah. It was the holy land. It was the sacred land. It was God's land. And here it was being ruled by idolaters. And even though some of the Herods outwardly identified with Judaism and took some kind of a public stand with Judaism, they were at heart ungodly idolaters. And, of course, over all of this is Tiberius Caesar, who is not only an idol worshiper but is himself an idol having affirmed himself to be god and demanded worship in his empire. The worst possible scenario for a people who have been cured of idolatry is to have idolaters ruling their land.

Then in verse 2 — even worse yet, because the involvement of the Gentiles was in some ways only sort of an oversight — you have in verse 2 the mention of two other names, Annas and Caiaphas, they were the high priests. Annas, the in effect high priest, Caiaphas the actual high priest, Annas running things from behind the scenes was the father-in-law of Caiaphas. But worse than having Romans with political power was having two corrupt priests who were themselves Jewish, who held the highest ranking position within the framework of the Jewish nation, and that is to be the high priest of the true God, who themselves were corrupt exploiters of their own people. It greatly bothered the Jews, obviously, to have Roman presence, but what was worse was to have the corrupt domination of these wicked priests and their system of exploitation and manipulation. They were literally running

an unbridled crime center in the temple of God, acting like a mafia family, taking advantage of their own people. So it was a sordid world politically, it was a sordid world religiously into which John stepped. That's the historical setting.

The geographical setting, we see it there also in verse 3. He came into all the district around the Jordan. That's the Judean wilderness. That's where he had lived for the thirty years prior. He was a man of the wilderness, wearing a camel's hair garment, eating locusts and wild honey. He was not a farmer; he was a man who just lived on the land in a wild sense. He was an uninvolved man. He wasn't in the social structure. He wasn't in the religious structure. He wasn't in the political structure. In fact, he would confront all of that as a man apart from it and uninfluenced by it and I think certainly by the design of God. He launched his ministry then right where he was, in the wilderness, with obvious disdain for the social establishment, political establishment, religious establishment. In fact, his ministry would confront all of those establishments and condemn those establishments as he exposed the wickedness of the people in every area.

Jewish leadership, the reigning Jewish leadership, couldn't have been used to announce the coming of Messiah, they were too corrupt. The reigning Gentile establishment couldn't have been used to announce the coming of Messiah because they didn't even believe in the things of God. God had to take a man and keep him completely isolated from the evil machinations and influences of those systems to keep him pure so that he could confront those systems. It was the religious establishment that executed Jesus. It was the political establishment that executed John. Neither of them was in a position to be used by God for the announcing of the Messiah. And so God has His own wilderness man.

The time then was desperate. It was a depressing time for Israel, under the bondage of pagans and apostate priests who had stolen the lives of the people, taken their freedom, taken their joy. It was the time when there was sort of hope against all hope and at that very time the Messiah is about to come.

So we've seen some of the temporal things, history and geography. Now let's look at some of the eternal things. First of all, theology; let's look at the theological setting. It's given to us at the end of verse 3. "When John came he came preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." And that again with an economy of words is a great statement of what every true preacher of God has always and will always preach. We preach a message that is no different really than the message of John. It is the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That is the message that God brings as good news into a world that is cursed by sin and damned to eternal punishment.

Now understanding the theological context is really important to understand the message of John. You might say, "Well, if John was preaching in a...in a Gentile city, if he was preaching in a Roman city, if he was preaching in a Greek city, or somewhere else we might understand this, but why does he come into Israel, into the midst of Judaism, into quote-unquote 'Old Testament religion' and preach repentance? Isn't that the... Isn't that the wrong place to preach that? Aren't they on the right track? Don't they just need a bump or a boost to get them moving a little further ahead to understand the New Covenant in Messiah?"

Not at all. Not at all. In fact, that's what was so shocking about the Sermon on the Mount. That's why when Jesus preached that sermon it was just absolutely riveting for the people to hear it because Jesus didn't say, "You know, you're really doing well, could you do a little better? You're concerned about the law, you're serious about the law, you're keeping the law, you're working at it, you're hanging in there on the Sabbath, you're doing the sacrifices, you've got the things going. Can I just kind of bump you up a few notches?" But rather He says to them in the opening of His Sermon on the Mount, "You have to realize your absolute, total spiritual bankruptcy, you have nothing. You have to consider yourselves as poor in spirit, you have to mourn over your bankruptcy, you have to be meek and hunger and thirst for a righteousness you don't have."

Jesus said, "The problem with you is," another time in His ministry, "you're like the man who went to the temple to pray and said, 'I thank You that I'm not like other men. You know, I fast and I tithe, and I do all these religious things, and I know You're really pleased with me, God.'" That's the way they saw things. They saw themselves as the possessors of a covenant relationship with God. They... They believed that because they were circumcised, that because they came out of the loins of Abraham, that they were protected from eternal judgment and they belonged to God in a very special way. And if they just did their best to keep the law they would certainly be reconciled to the true and living God and they would enter into the fullness of Abrahamic promise, Davidic promise and ultimately into the kingdom of God forever.

And John comes into the situation and says, "You're all wrong. You're all wrong." At the end of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, "Your problem is you have a religious house, you just built it (on what?) on sand. You've got to go back to the very foundation, you're wrong from the get-go." The whole system is bankrupt. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Your prayers are useless. Your fasting is useless. Your self-righteousness is useless. Everything you do is useless in terms of reconciliation with God." And that was essentially what John said. John said his message is very clear, "God will forgive your sins if you repent." That was the problem in Judaism. The problem wasn't that they didn't understand forgiveness, they did and they understood that God was a forgiving God.

They understood repentance. But they didn't believe it applied to them because they had convinced themselves that they were righteous and self-righteous and were unwilling to humble themselves. That's why He starts that Sermon on the Mount by saying, "You've got to realize your spiritual bankruptcy." That was the issue, your poverty. You have nothing, nothing, and you have to humble yourselves and demonstrate a hunger for righteousness which you don't have and can't achieve.

Now I want you to understand the Jews were not idolatrous. They were cured of idolatry by the Babylonian captivity. I mean their history in the Old Testament, you go back, follow the history of the nation after Abraham and you find that they struggled with idols. The northern kingdom, the southern kingdom, they struggled with idols. The northern kingdom 722 B.C. taken captive, the southern kingdom 586 B.C. taken captive to Babylon; those great acts of divine punishment were on the people who had turned from God to idols. Well when they went into captivity in Babylon that cured them. When they came back seventy years later they were cured of idolatry. And even to this day those who are serious about their Judaism have no place for idols. And you can say that to the credit of even the Jews at the time of Jesus, they hated images of Caesar on the coins, they hated images of Caesar on the banners, or flags, or breastplates, or any paraphernalia that belonged to the Roman presence. They hated that because they had been cured of idolatry. But in the place of idolatry where they were worshiping some other god, they were now worshiping themselves in a self-righteous effort to achieve a right relationship to God by their own effort. Their religion then, was legalistic, it was superficial, and it was hypocritical.

The best assessment that I know of of their religion at the time of the New Testament is found in Romans 2. Turn to Romans 2 for a minute. I think Paul really nailed the issue when he defines their religious perspective. In chapter 2 of Romans and verse 17, he says to them, "If you bear the name Jew and rely upon the law and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the law..." Now let me stop there for a minute. That's exactly what they did. They... They bore the name Jew as an indication of covenant blessing. They relied upon the law of God, they were putting their faith and trust and hope in their eternal future on the law of God. They were boasting in God, their God, Jehovah God, the one and only true God. And they know His will. Why? Because they have the Scriptures. And they were approving the things that are essential. They understood the nature of God, the attributes of God, things like that. They were instructed out of the law relentlessly and constantly by fathers in the home, by rabbis and scribes and everybody else and priests.

So as a result of all of that intake and all of that commitment to the true God and the Scripture, he says, "You are confident," verse 19, “that you yourself are a guide to the blind, you are a light to those who are in darkness, you are a corrector of the foolish, you are a teacher of the immature." In other

words, you are the people who can straighten out everybody. You have the true God, you have the true Word, the true Scripture, the true knowledge, the true instruction and so you can guide the blind and you can light the dark and you can correct the foolish and you can teach the immature because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth. And that's exactly how they saw themselves. They had all the answers for everybody.

And then he says this, verse 21, "You therefore who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" What's your problem? “You who preach that one shouldn't steal, do you steal? You who say that one shouldn't commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who hate idols, do you rob temples?" And that could be a reference to the temple of the true God. "You who boast in the law through your breaking the law, do you dishonor God?"

In other words, you are holding up the standard for everybody else and you can't live it. You can't live it. You can't even teach yourself to be obedient to God's law. You can't preach yourself into submission to God's law. You tell others not to steal and you steal. You tell others not to commit adultery and you commit adultery. You boast in the law, verse 23, but through your breaking the law you just dishonor God. And this is Paul literally dismantling their confidence. In fact, in verse 24 is one of the most shocking statements, I'm sure, they would ever have heard, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." It isn't that the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles in spite of you, but because of you, because of your phoniness, your superficiality, your legalism, your...your shallowness, your hypocrisy. You dishonor God. You bring blasphemy on His name. I mean, this is a tremendously penetrating indictment.

And that's exactly the condition they were in when John arrived. Oh they thought they had it all. They knew the true God. They had the true Word. They were in a position to guide the blind, to light the dark, to correct the foolish, to teach the immature. They were literally the embodiment of knowledge and truth because they knew the law. And they were very busy making sure that they held the law over everybody else's head. The fact was, however, they had no internal power to keep it themselves and they were the cause of the Gentile blaspheming the name of God.

The problem is down in verse 28 of Romans 2, "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh, but he's a Jew who is one inwardly,” inwardly, inwardly. See, the heart wasn't right. The heart wasn't right. There was ceremony, right. There was ritual, there was tradition. There was religious formality. There was a measure of external observance of the law of God, but the heart was not God's. The heart was not God's. They were hypocrites. They were legalists on the outside. As Jesus describes in Matthew 23, they were like tombs, whitewashed on the outside and inside they were full of stinking flesh and rotting bones.

In Matthew chapter 23 Jesus indicts them again. And this is another good insight into the nature of the theological setting. Jesus says, verse 13 of Matthew 23, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees." “Woe” means damnation or judgment. Why? "Because you're hypocrites, you shut off the kingdom of heaven from men." I can't think of anything worse for a religious person to do than to shut people out of God's kingdom. I don't think that was what they thought but that's exactly what they were doing. You are shutting off the kingdom of heaven for men for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.

There are people actually trying to get in the kingdom and you prevent it, you prevent it. Verse 28: "You are outwardly appearing righteous. Inwardly you're full of hypocrisy and lawlessness." Now there is a both a Pauline and a...and a Christ-given assessment of their religion.

Now what did they need? Did they need just a few bumps? You know: “Hey you're doing fine. You're so far along you just need a few more notches up”? No, John comes in and says, "Here's your problem. Your problem is you need forgiveness." And, folks, I've said this so much. This is simply the message from the beginning of redemptive history to the end. God will forgive sin. That's the message, that's the good news, that's the gospel. It isn't Jesus will fix your life, Jesus will fix your marriage, Jesus will make you happy. The issue is a sin issue. God will forgive your sin. And that is what John came preaching and that’s what Jesus came preaching and that's what the prophets preached and that's what everybody who has ever been faithful has preached. John came doing exactly what everybody else who was a true spokesman for God has done, and said to sinful people, "God will forgive, but you have to reassess your condition and it calls for repentance, which is a very, very great leap for a person who has spent years convincing himself he doesn't need that. The attitude of Luke 18 again, "I thank You that I'm not like other men, I tithe, and I...and I fast and I pray and I do all these wonderful things, aren't You happy with me, God?" That's a far cry from the publican who won't lift his eyes, pounding his chest, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said that man went home justified, not the other.

Well what...that in a...in an illustration form is sort of a microcosm of what was going on in the whole nation. So John comes and he preaches the one message that every true preacher preaches, and that is God forgives the sins of those who repent. That was his message. It’s always the message, that's the gospel. God will forgive sinners who repent. And He will. He always has, He always will.

The theology of John and his message then is forgiveness comes from God to those who truly repent. Now there are three elements in the statement: Forgiveness of sin, repentance, and baptism. And we

need to look at these. Obviously, those are huge subjects. I do want to look at the issue of forgiveness just this morning and next time we'll cover the rest of this section. We can get through all of it next time, but this is so foundational.

Let's talk about forgiveness of sin. But let's try to talk about it as if we were in the time of John and living in Israel and caught up in that kind of religion. On the one hand, you're told to believe that if you do the ceremonies and you do the sacrifices and you do what you're supposed to do and you make a great effort to keep the law of God and you don't violate the Sabbath and you don't take a trip and you don't carry your burden, and, etc., etc., etc., you keep the law of God, the ceremonies of God and all the Jewish traditions as much as you can, if you really work hard at that, you're going to come to the kingdom of God. You're really going to get there.

But, the Jewish people also understand, and this may have been something of the schizophrenia they were living in, that...that the Bible keeps talking about forgiveness and at some point there must have been a tension in the mind of a person saying, "Well, I just can't get there. I can't do it and so I am left with this weight of guilt." And the more they emphasize the rules to me, like Matthew 23 where Jesus said they bind heavy burdens on men which they are not even able to bear and they don't lift as much as a finger to help them bear them. Here came the religious leaders dumping more law, and more law, and more law on these people and telling them to carry this burden, and carry this weight, and carry this thing and be perfectly obedient to all of these...these interpretations of laws and ceremonies and traditions. They couldn't carry it. There must have been under all that almost a schizophrenia saying, “This is the only way I'm going to get saved but I can't get there and I know the Old Testament talks about forgiveness.”

Well, when John came preaching forgiveness, it must have rang somebody's bell because it says all Judea and Jerusalem went out to hear about it. I mean, I think that they were under such a weight they knew that they weren't getting there, many of them did. Their whole lives were taken up with matters of sin. They couldn't keep the law of God so they had to go make sacrifices, sacrifice, sacrifice, over and over and over and over and over and over. The whole system was a bloody system of sacrifice. As I've said before, priests were primarily butchers. They just slaughtered animals and offered sacrifices for the people.

So the people lived under the law of God, the Mosaic Covenant, the law, the moral law, the ceremonial law and the burden of that law. They couldn't keep it. They knew they were then sinful. They went and offered sacrifices to show God that they recognized their sin and that they recognized the price and the cost of their sin was death. So they lived with ideas of sin and punishment, sacrifice.

They also knew the Abrahamic promise that God had promised the land and blessing and prosperity and all of that. They knew the Davidic promise God had made to David that a greater King would come, the Messiah, He'd rule and His Kingdom would be a Kingdom of peace, prosperity and would stretch over the whole world and they weren't getting those things, there was no fulfillment of the promises to Abraham, the promises to David. There was no fulfillment of all the promises that the...that the prophets had reiterated about the coming kingdom and the glory of Messiah and salvation filling the earth and peace filling the earth and the glory of the Lord filling the earth, and the...all of those great hopeful things. They didn't experience that.

Here they were under Gentile oppression and being led around by corrupt priests and I think they realized that they weren't getting anywhere. And there was a hunger in the hearts of many of them for forgiveness. They knew the New Covenant promised forgiveness. They knew that if they knew the New Covenant, and I'm certain that many of them did.

In Jeremiah 31... You know, the only way they would ever receive the Abrahamic Covenant promise and Davidic Covenant promise would be through New Covenant salvation. And the New Covenant, Jeremiah 31:31: "I'll make a New Covenant." He goes on to talk about the New Covenant, and what is the character of it? Verse 34, here it is, "I will forgive their iniquity and their sin I will remember no more." That was what their heart longed for. I mean, the sacrifices were a beleaguering, wearying process, endless. Where was New Covenant forgiveness? When were they going to experience that, that forgiveness Isaiah wrote about? Also Ezekiel wrote about that in that profound 16th chapter where he says in verse 60, "I will remember My covenant with you in the days of your youth. I will establish an everlasting covenant with you." And then in verse 63 He says, "When I have forgiven you for all that you have done." So they knew that there was forgiveness out there. But how to get it? How to get it?

Here comes John and he's preaching forgiveness and that is really a great message of hope to a people under such immense weight. They also knew that God was a forgiving God. I mean, they as a people they knew their Old Testament. They would have known that God was a forgiving God. In Micah chapter 7, "Who is a God like Thee who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?" There's no God like You who forgives sin. They would have known the cry of David in Psalm 32, the cry of David in Psalm 51 that God would forgive him and wash him and make him clean. They would have remembered Psalm...I think it's 103:12, where God says I'll remove your transgressions as far as the east is from the west. They knew God was a forgiving God. They would have remembeved and they had to remember, they happened to be involved in it every

year when they went to the Day of Atonement and the sacrifice for the sins of the nation for the year was offered. They would then take a live goat. According to Leviticus 16:20 to 22: The priest would come, he would put his hands on the head of this live goat and he would literally recite all the transgressions of the people and transferring them symbolically to the goat. That's exactly what Leviticus 16 says, so he's transferring all the sins to the goat and then there's a man standing by who takes the goat way out in the wilderness from which the goat never comes back.

And the picture there is that God forgives sin and sends it completely out of His presence. They understood that. They understood God is a forgiving God by nature. They understood that there was forgiveness promised in the New Covenant. They understood that there was forgiveness in atonement as indicated by what's called the scapegoat, the goat that takes away the sin to indicate that God removes it forever from His presence. They understood all of that. And I would venture to say there were many people, even though they were pressing down this path of self-righteousness, who were literally knowing in their hearts that what they really needed was forgiveness. And, in fact, Zacharias, when he held little baby John in his arms back in chapter 1 and verse 76 said, "You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways." He said this in verse 77, "To give His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins." That is the only way people are saved. That's the only possible way to have a right relationship to God or to get into heaven, by the forgiveness of sin. And there surely were people who were coming to grips with that reality. That is... That is very likely why the whole of Jerusalem and Judea was pouring out into the wilderness of Judea down by the Jordan River to listen to this man, John, who was preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins and then a baptism as a public confession of that repentance.

So this was the theological condition at the time. Sure they were longing for Messiah, but they weren't really ready in heart to receive Messiah because that form of superficial, hypocritical, legalistic, self-righteous religion didn't ready anybody for Messiah. They had to come to a true recognition of their condition which was that they were wicked, sinful, alienated, separated and doomed even though they were the people of God.

Now, what brings that forgiveness? Notice verse 3, "repentance." And I'll just say a word about it. We'll get in to it next time. That's the word *metanoia*. Some form of that word is used about fourteen times by Luke. It's a wonderful, wonderful word because it's the path to forgiveness. It always has been, always will be. Some years back I wrote a book called *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which launched no small furor in the...in the evangelical world because it basically said that repentance is necessary for salvation and all kinds of people wanted to fight against that. It's hard to imagine, frankly, because clearly John preached repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

But that isn't even new. They understood repentance. They are not ignorant. They could have gone back, for example, among a number of possible passages, maybe the most notable one Isaiah 55 and that, by the way, would have been a section of Isaiah with which many Jews would be very familiar. Verse 6, "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call on Him while He is near, let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts and let him return to the Lord and He will have compassion on him and to our God for He will abundantly pardon, or forgive." They knew Isaiah 55:6-7 had pronounced forgiveness on those who came and sought it. They also knew that great 18th chapter of Ezekiel which is the chapter on individual responsibility and it says in verse 30, "Therefore I will judge you, oh house of Israel, each according to his conduct, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn away from all your transgressions so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions which you've committed. Make yourselves a new heart, a new spirit. Why will you die, oh house of Israel?" Repent, repent, repent, that's not a new message and God offers forgiveness for those who repent.

What is repentance? Well, it's not an intellectual change of mind about what you believe. It's not some level of superficial remorse about the consequences of sin or the effects of sin. It is a radical turning in one's mind that causes a person to see the reality of his own sinfulness: Its effect, its ugliness, its dishonor of God, its shame before men and its eternal consequence. It's when you really turn around and see your wicked condition and then you say, "God, there is no hope for me to correct this. I have to ask you to forgive me. I cannot make it right. I can't do enough things to cancel out the bad things. I can't do anything righteous. It's all sin."

It's a radical recognition that You are sinful at the core and you see the ugliness and the effect and the dishonor and the shame and the judgment that's connected to that sin and you come to God and you say, "I'm hopeless." That's when you come broken in spirit with a spirit that's called poverty of spirit, bankrupt, meek, mourning over your sins. When you come like that, God provides forgiveness. And that is the message that John preached, and that is still the message that we preach. And then John also added baptism to it and I'll explain the significance of that because that was the outward indication of a genuine repentance, a public confession. That's John's message and it's not any different than, as I said, any other message by any other faithful preacher in any other time in redemptive history.

One of the things I love about Eastern Europe is that whenever they talk about someone becoming a Christian they say, "He repented.” “He repented." That's how they refer to it. I'll never forget, well in all of my occasions of preaching over there I've seen this, but I'll never forget the first time I saw it I was

really surprised because I didn't expect it. And I was preaching in the central church in Kiev and the place was jammed wall to wall, so many people there that as many were standing inside and outside in the cold looking through the windows as were seated and there's a general slow motion as people exchanged seats. There's a certain sort of unwritten, wonderful code where you can only sit so long and then you get up and somebody who has been standing sits and you change places; and this kind of goes on all the time.

But it's so packed. And at the end of the service which is always a long time. There's three sermons and a lot of singing. The pastor said, "Does anyone want to repent? You've heard the gospel which I've preached, does anybody want to repent? If you want to repent, come forward and repent." And so that's exactly what began to happen and went on for a couple of hours. People would kind of wiggle their way and come through the crowd and when they got to the front he would hand them a microphone and he would say, "Now repent." They'd take the microphone and repent. And then after a person repented they hugged the person, embraced the person and sing a hymn, and then the next person would repent and they'd hug him and sing a hymn, and the next person would repent. And that went on for a couple of hours and that is the right approach. That's exactly what John was preaching, repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The theological condition of Israel was desperate. The political condition was desperate. Even the place where John ministered was...was pretty desperate, it was a wilderness desert. But the most desperate of all settings was the hearts of this group of people. They had the law of God, they had the true God, they didn't know Him, and they were on their way to eternal judgment unless they repented, unless they could turn against their pride, unless they could say no to their pride and humble themselves and fall on their faces and beat on their breasts, as it were, and plead for forgiveness, knowing they couldn't save themselves. If they did that, they would be ready for Messiah's kingdom.

Well, as the story unfolds, apparently many did it, most of whom were superficial as the rest of the story indicates. There really isn't any way to guard against that. We'll see how that unfolds. But next time we'll pick up a little more about repentance and I'll describe to you this baptism. And it's not like any baptism you might assume in the New Testament. It's a unique one and I'll explain it to you next time.

Lord, again what a joy it is to be together with Your people, to gather around Your Word, to be reminded again of the greatness of the message of forgiveness. We can't achieve salvation. We can't better ourselves. We can't change our own hearts. As the prophet of old said, "Can the leopard

change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin?" We can't do that. Nor can those of us who are evil do good on our own. Our heart indeed is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. We can't even know it, let alone change it. Bring us to the place of repentance, where we give up trying to be on our own what we need to be to gain righteousness, which is an utter impossibility, for by the doing of the law no one will ever be right with You, and bring us to a place of bankruptcy where we will be willing to repent, a radical change in how we view ourselves, seeing ourselves sinners, hopeless and helpless in need of forgiveness. And when we come in that way, Your grace is put on display and You grant us forgiveness. Oh Father, I pray that for everyone here in the name of Christ. Amen.

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