

The Gospel According to Luke

“Extreme Spiritual Makeover” Chapter 3:1-14

Introduction

Tens of thousands have applied to be part of either *Extreme Makeover* or *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. For those of you blissfully unaware, those are television shows. They solicit people who desire either themselves or their homes to be renovated. The people are put through radical surgical procedures; the homes are practically demolished, then rebuilt.

We have something like that in our text. John the Baptist called God’s people out into the wilderness for an extreme makeover. It involved filling valleys, leveling mountains, straightening what was crooked, and smoothing what was rough. If it were on TV, it might have been called, *Extreme Makeover: Spiritual Edition*. It wasn’t accomplished by surgery or construction, but by “repentance.”

Some of us may want a surgeon’s extreme makeover... Or a contractors extreme makeover for our home. All of us need an extreme makeover of the heart. There’s no application to fill-out; nothing you need to do in order to qualify. All you must do is “repent.”

We’ll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 **Repent!** And You Will Stay Ready For The Return Of The King, and #2 **Repent!** And You Will Start Revealing The Realness Of The Kingdom.

#1 **Repent!** And You Will Stay Ready
For The Return Of The King
(v1-6)

“Repent!” is a word we normally associate with evangelism of the unsaved. John’s message of repentance was *not* geared towards unbelievers; it was for the people of God.

Luke 3:1 Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,

The Jews were an oppressed people; their land was occupied. They were the subjects of the Roman Empire, ruled by its Caesars who appointed “governors” and “tetrarchs” over them.

The Romans went so far as to interfere with the religion of the Jews. In verse two you read,

Luke 3:2 while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests...

Since a Jewish “high priest” served for life, there should only be one. Historians tell us that the Roman government was appointing its own religious leaders to maintain greater control over the Jews. Apparently the Roman authorities had deposed the Jewish-appointed Annas. Caiaphas was his son-in-law. Caiaphas held the office, but Annas retained his title (see Acts 4:6) and probably much of the power and influence it carried.

Occupied... Oppressed... The government was even messing with their religious beliefs. There was only one solution:

Luke 3:2 ...the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.

God saw their situation differently. He saw them from the inside-out, looking upon the heart. Government and religion were not their problem; therefore a change in either would not be a solution. Their hearts needed radical change – the kind made possible by a revival of God's Word.

Maybe your issues are with the government, or with the religious establishment. More than likely, they are things like your marriage, or family, or employment. You need to see your situation from the inside-out. What does God want to do in your heart? The solution will be a revival of God's Word.

Back at the end of chapter one we learned that “John” lived out in the desert “wilderness.” He waited there until he received direction from the Lord; only then he came preaching the message God had given him.

The need of God’s people was great. But their greatest need was for a return to God. A message must be formed in the heart of a man who would deliver it without compromise. Overthrowing Rome was a small thing compared to reaching the hearts of men and women.

Luke 3:3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,

Although Jews were sometimes immersed in water to signify a total commitment to God, for the most part the only persons baptized were Gentiles who converted to become Jews. It was symbolic of washing away the filth of their pagan background. John’s baptism was telling Jews they were no more ready for the arrival of their King than a Gentile; they were no better-off spiritually than the Gentiles. Submitting to it was admitting their spiritual need.

There was some additional symbolism involved with John’s baptism. He was performing baptisms “around the Jordan” River. It was close to the very place where, centuries earlier, Joshua had led the children of Israel out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Those who went out to be baptized by John in the wilderness were acknowledging that they were in a spiritual wilderness, needing to be led into the Kingdom of God by their Messiah.

It’s interesting to note that the name “Joshua” was the Old Testament equivalent of “Jesus.” As Joshua led the Jews into the Promised Land, Jesus would lead them into the promised Kingdom of God on earth.

John’s “baptism” was identified with “repentance and the remission of sins.” We have our own ideas about what these terms mean. We should set our ideas aside and learn what they mean from the text itself.

Luke 3:4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying:
“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.

Luke 3:5 *Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth;*

The quote is from Isaiah 40:3-5. John the Baptist was the fulfillment of the “voice... crying in the wilderness” who would immediately precede the coming of the King. In John’s day, before a king took a trip, messengers would tell those he was planning to visit that he was coming. They would prepare the roads for the king’s arrival. Pot-holes would be filled; rough spots would be smoothed-out. Landscaping and drainage would be improved.

John used it as a metaphor. The promised Messiah was coming. His subjects should prepare “the way of [their] Lord.” John wasn’t talking about the roads and landscaping leading into their villages, cities, and towns. He was talking about inner pathways – those of the heart. They should prepare their hearts; they should “repent.”

“Repent” means *to turn around*; it means *to change your mind*. That is how it is defined. Definitions are necessary and good; but descriptions are better. “Repentance” is described using five images:

1. “Make His paths straight...” The “straight” path is the path that gets you where you are going as quickly as possible. It takes no detours. So the first thing we want to address in our hearts would be things that may have detoured us from following the Lord. Almost anything can be a detour. I’ve seen folks take *doctrinal* detours... *Geographic* detours... *Career* detours... *Relationship* detours... Ask the Lord to reveal whether or not you’re on a detour.
2. “Every valley shall be filled...” Valleys are low places; they are depressions. Are you low? Depressed? **Fill your valley!** Bring-in material that will fill it; bring in the Word of God. Take your thoughts captive; preach to yourself; fill your mind and your heart will be filled.
3. “Every mountain and hill brought low...” High-places need to be demolished. We’re talking about pride and self-righteousness and

self-sufficiency. Humble yourself before God. Tear-down any high and lofty thoughts you have about yourself. Forget self-esteem and esteem others better than yourself.

4. “**The crooked places shall be made straight...**” “**Crooked**” has the connotation of *twisted* or *perverse*. It is referring to sin. Have you fallen into sin? Are things that you once considered sin now a regular part of your life? Get rid of them! Flee from them!
5. “**The rough ways smooth...**” We describe people as being ‘rough around the edges.’ What are your rough edges? What makes it tough for others to be around you? Do you excuse yourself by saying, “*That’s just the way I am,*” or by blaming others for your reactions? God wants to change you.

These are heart-issues that affect believers. **Believers** are the ones who need to repent. We need to adopt repentance as a lifestyle; it should be a constant attitude of the heart. The key is to really believe the Lord is imminently coming. You’ll want to stay ready for His return at all times.

The Isaiah passage ended with a remarkable promise:

Luke 3:6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

“**All flesh**” means that God was calling out to all people everywhere with the message of “**salvation.**” Unbelievers “**see the salvation of God**” by seeing Jesus. They can only see Jesus as He lives in and through believers. To me it seems to imply that if believers will repent, *unbelievers will believe!*

John’s baptism also signified “**the remission of sins.**” One of the meanings of “**remission**” is *liberty*. Remember the symbolism: They were being baptized near the spot Joshua had led their ancestors into the Promised Land. In the Promised Land the children of Israel battled their enemies from a position of victory as they went forward claiming what God had already given them to possess.

I believe this is the sense in which we are to understand the phrase “**remission of sins.**” John’s baptism did not save you; it did not wash away your sins. It reminded you that you were *liberated* from the

power of your sins in order to walk in victory and go forward claiming what God had given you to possess.

What does this life of victory look like when it is lived-out?

#2 **Repent!** And You Will Start Revealing
The Realness Of The Kingdom
(v7-14)

The current catch-phrase in Christian Churches is *seeker-sensitive*. We are told we need to be sensitive to those seeking God – not pushing them away, but bringing them into the Church slowly and gently.

John was more the **seeker-insensitive** type!

Luke 3:7 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

The imagery is a desert fire forcing the “**vipers**” to flee ahead of it. God’s “**wrath**” was the fire; the “**multitudes**” were all those coming out to be baptized.

There needs to be an element in preaching of the coming judgment of God against sin. You need to know you are lost before you can be saved.

By referring to them as “**vipers**,” John was telling the multitudes that they were children of the devil. He was the serpent; they were his offspring, his “**brood of vipers**.” Everyone born of a woman (with the exception of Jesus) inherits a sin nature. They are lost and under the dominion of the devil.

Even the Jews, God’s chosen people, were not saved by birth:

Luke 3:8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.

Luke 3:9 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

They fled to John as “vipers”; having heard him, there was a decision to be made. There was no cultural or religious or spiritual heritage that could save them. They must make a personal, individual decision to identify with their Savior.

Many multitudes did just that and were baptized. Not all were sincere; not all were saved. So the image changes. No longer “vipers” fleeing, they were “trees” whose spiritual life could be seen in whether or not they bore any “fruit.”

The multitudes wanted some clarification:

Luke 3:10 So the people asked him, saying, “What shall we do then?”

What does “repentance” and the “remission (deliverance) of sins” look like when it issues forth from the heart? John gave three examples which reveal the fruit of true spiritual life.

In the first example, you are characterized by compassion:

Luke 3:11 He answered and said to them, “He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.”

It’s not communism, or even a program of social welfare. It’s that you are compassionate. You care for the plight of others and see yourself as a channel of God’s love to them.

In the next example, you are characterized by a lack of covetousness:

Luke 3:12 Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”

Luke 3:13 And he said to them, “Collect no more than what is appointed for you.”

Jews were employed as tax collectors by Rome. They were notorious for their dishonesty. Romans gathered funds for their government by farming out the collection privilege. Tax collectors earned their own living by adding a sizable sum to the total - whatever they could get away with - and keeping this money for themselves. It was rooted in coveting material goods.

In the final example, you are characterized by contentment:

Luke 3:14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?"
So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

These were Jews employed by Rome to guard the Temple; sort of like a police force subordinate to the Roman army. They weren't paid much, so they would abuse their power to shake-down their fellow Jews for bribes. Not so if they were bringing forth the fruit of repentance.

In each of the examples, material things are either shared or shunned in favor of spiritual blessings. They are examples of a basic Kingdom principle for living, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

Especially in the case of tax collectors and soldiers, "repentance and the remission of sins" could be seen. Their change of heart led to radical changes in behavior. It spoke of the realness of the Kingdom to them. They were living as if in the Kingdom already. They were revealing the Kingdom to others.

The Kingdom is yet to come. We're not in it. Jesus will return and establish it in His Second Coming.

We can live according to its principles; we can reveal its realness as we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and mind; and our neighbors as ourself.

Conclusion

Let's work backwards from what we've learned. Ask yourself, "Am I revealing the realness of Kingdom living?"

If I am not; if you are not; Then you need to "Repent!"

1. Are you pursuing a detour?
2. Is there a depression in your life needing to be filled by obedience to God's Word?

3. What high place of pride or self needs to be torn down?
4. Is there some sin you need to confess?
5. What rough edges have you grown comfortable with?