



A Lesson for Ash Wednesday

Lesson Introduction:

The season of Lent is never mentioned in Scripture but has historically been observed as 40 days of preparation for Easter. During this time, believers are encouraged to examine themselves before they celebrate the resurrection of Christ Jesus. This is an ancient tradition dating back to the 300s AD. The 40 days are modeled after the 40 days that Jesus spent in the wilderness fasting and preparing for his public ministry. The traditional beginning of Lent is “Ash Wednesday” which falls on the 14th of March this year (2024). There are numerous traditions and customs associated with Lent but the primary benefit in the season is found when believers intentionally take time (often by fasting, prayer, and Bible study) to prepare themselves to commemorate the resurrection. Such preparation could also include repentance and reflection.

Why should we prepare to celebration the resurrection? First, the resurrection was so significant to the early church that they designated the first day of the week as their meeting day. This was a weekly reminder that we have hope for salvation because Jesus arose on the first day of the week after his crucifixion. Second, Resurrection Sunday is considered by many to be the highest day on the Christian calendar. It seems as if Christmas receives much more attention (with much more preparation) than Easter. However, even in the Gospels, we do not see every writer describing the birth of Jesus but we do see every writer dedicating significant portions of their text to the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Likewise, in the Epistles, the resurrection of Jesus is discussed far more than the birth of Jesus. Third, this is a most significant day for believers because the resurrection confirms that Jesus is who he says he was and can do what he promised to do. Even Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:14 that if Christ is not raised our preaching and our faith are useless. On Resurrection Sunday we have a powerful reminder that our faith is not useless but powerful even unto salvation for our faith is in the one who overcame sin and death (Romans 4:23-25). An event of such importance deserves our attention and preparation. These lessons are designed to help prepare our hearts and minds to greater appreciate and celebrate the resurrection.

The concept of preparing in advance to receive a great work of God is not the invention of man. God often instructed his people to prepare for his plan. In the New Testament, God specifically raised up John the Baptist for a ministry of preparing the people of God to receive the Son of God. As we will see in this lesson, John the Baptist explained how the people should prepare to receive Jesus in the flesh. Through this, we can discover some lessons on how we might prepare to meet him in our resurrection celebrations.

Read the Text: Luke 3:1-20

Understanding the Text:

Who was John the Baptist?

John the Baptist’s story begins in Luke 1 and Luke’s Gospel actually begins with the foretelling of John’s birth. Luke is the only Gospel writer to share the birth narrative of John the Baptist. It may seem strange to begin a Gospel story about Jesus by describing the conception and birth of his distant cousin. Yet John’s role in the story of Jesus is quite significant even though he died even before Jesus. Each Gospel writer discusses the ministry of John the Baptist as being active prior to the ministry of Jesus and for the purpose of preparing the people for the ministry of Jesus. Luke, however, gives us the most details regarding this unusual character.

Before he was John the Baptist, John the baby was born into the home of a Jewish priest named Zechariah. John's mother was Elizabeth. His birth was quite miraculous as Elizabeth was previously barren and both were older people. Zechariah named him John against the wishes of his family and neighbors. They protested this name but the parents insisted because of the clear instructions they had received from the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:13. John did not go on to serve in the Jerusalem Temple as his father did. Rather, he followed the call of God into the wilderness. Those who wished to hear John preach had to go out to him in deserted places. Nevertheless, his ministry was quite popular and many from Jerusalem and the greater region of Judea went out to hear him. His preaching led many to repent and be baptized.

Although John saw his father wear the fancy robes of Jerusalem priest, John chose the less glamorous robe of camel's hair. Indeed, John's clothing and eating habits were peculiar as noted by Matthew and Mark. Mark 1:6 says that he survived on locusts and honey and that he wore a garment made of camel's hair and fastened with a leather belt. This was also Elijah's clothing of choice as seen in 2 Kings 1:8. This direct comparison was intentional as we see it happening again in Mark 9:13 as well as in Matthew 17:11-12; Luke 1:17; and John 1:25. Elijah was considered one of the greatest of Israel. The wonderful record of his life concluded with a dramatic exit from the earth in a chariot of fire (2 Kings 2:11). The nature of Elijah's departure led some Jewish religious leaders to consider and teach that Elijah would return as seen in Mark 9:11. Jesus confirms that John the Baptist does serve to fulfill this teaching. John the Baptist is not, however, the reincarnation of Elijah or the literal Elijah (John 1:21). Rather, as Gabriel explained to John's father in Luke 1:17, John will operate "in the spirit and power of Elijah." John's prophetic ministry will be like that of Elijah's in power and significance. Thus, John's clothing was an obvious visual connection most likely intended to emphasize to the people of Israel that a prophet of the same importance of Elijah had come to them. Based on the popularity of John's ministry, the people obviously recognized the significance of this man.

Every Gospel writer connects John's ministry with Isaiah 40:3: A voice of one calling in the desert prepare the way for the Lord. John even quotes this text to describe himself in John 1:23. It is clear that John the Baptist had a ministry of preparation. His primary methods of preparing the way for the Lord was to preach and baptize people. His sermons were summed up in Luke 3:3- John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. Baptism is never presented in the Old Testament as a means of forgiveness. Jews practiced some forms of baptism but only for certain cleansing rituals and ceremonies for new converts to Judaism. John, however, is encouraging all to be baptized as an outward sign of an inward repentance. Remember, John's primary audience is not pagan Gentiles but Jews. It is the historical people of God that John calls a "brood of vipers" in Luke 3:7. John is perhaps the first to proclaim a consistent New Testament teaching that simply being Abraham's children (descendants) is not sufficient for salvation (see John 8:31-47; Romans 3:28-29; 9:6-18; Galatians 3:6-9). Rather, Israel (even Israel) must repent and respond to God in faith for forgiveness.

The Message of Repentance

Although baptism was quite unique with John, repentance was a constant Old Testament prophetic theme and the people of Israel were familiar with this concept, for they were often called upon to repent. Repentance is the act of turning away from sin and wrongdoing and turning towards God. In the New Testament, repentance is also the appropriate response to the preaching of Gospel and the Kingdom of God. Repentance is an act of faith. Although some do turn away physically from certain sinful actions and behavior, all must turn towards God in faith believing that he will forgive the sins of the truly penitent. Perhaps one of the most dramatic calls to repentance is in Joel 2:12-13: "Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity." Joel's message is that genuine repentance must flow from the heart before it is spoken with the lips. If repentance is only outward (rending your garment) it has no value. But if repentance is inward (rending your heart) it is genuine. In Jewish culture, tearing clothes was a sign of repentance or grief. Yet torn clothes are useless in the eyes of God if the heart is not turned toward God in genuine faith. Indeed, Israel had heard the call to repent often, John was not the first to come with this message to this people.

John was also not the first prophet to declare the coming of the Messiah. Several others before John looked forward to the coming of God's anointed one, for that is what "messiah" means. The people of

God eagerly anticipated the anointed one of God who would be an eternal deliverer (Isaiah 11). John the Baptist described him as “one more powerful than I . . . the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16). John goes on to compare Jesus to a farmer who gathers the wheat for placement in the barn (salvation) then burns up the chaff with unquenchable fire (condemnation). While John reminds the people that the Messiah would judge the wicked, John is certain that those who truly repent will receive forgiveness of sins. Even Joel’s prophecy had an element of uncertainty to it. In Joel 2:14, Joel proclaims, “Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing.” John, however, is confident about the forgiveness that follows repentance in light of the coming Messiah. John was not the only one to prophecy about the Messiah but he was one of the few who got to see the actual coming of the Messiah and therefore proclaimed his message with a level of confidence perhaps unavailable to former prophets.

A Harsh Message

The general content of John’s message is quite negative. Consider some of the statements he makes towards those who made the inconvenient trek to find him:

- “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” – Luke 3:7
- “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” – Luke 3:9
- “He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” – Luke 3:17

It is also recorded in Luke that John rebuked all manner of people: the crowds of Jews, the tax collectors, the soldiers, and even the king. For this last one, John would be arrested and eventually beheaded. What is John’s strategy here in rebuking and speaking harshly to all who come to him? This is another aspect of his ministry of preparation. John wants the people to fully understand the bad news (that even Israel is sinful and worthy of death) before they can better appreciate and accept the good news (that Jesus came to suffer the penalty of sin on behalf of sinners and offer eternal salvation to all who have genuine faith). This is actually a common Biblical approach. God sends Jonah to Nineveh with only a message of bad news and total destruction. Yet once Nineveh believes and repents, God saves the city and the good news is declared that God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. Once Nineveh understood the bad news, they were desperate to grab on to the good news. The Apostle Paul uses this tactic in Romans. Paul states the Gospel message in Romans 1:16-17 (the righteousness and salvation of God is revealed from heaven) but then immediately turns to the bad news beginning in Romans 1:18 (the wrath of God is also being revealed from heaven). Paul carries on with bad news until Romans 3:20. Finally, in Romans 3:21, Paul returns to the good news. After thoroughly explaining the bad news, Paul’s audience is ready and desperate for the good news. Even the overall structure of the Bible follows this pattern. In the Old Testament, God presents the Law not primarily as a means of salvation but ultimately as a tool for making humanity aware of their sinfulness, inability, and need for a savior. When the bad news of the Law had been thoroughly expressed through numerous generations, humanity was ready to receive the good news with the coming of the Messiah. In all these cases, the bad news was presented to prepare the people to appreciate and receive the good news. All this bad news was not only a tactic for the preacher, it was a reality for the hearer. The bad news was real. John’s bad news for Israel was not imagined or new, it was part of the prophetic tradition. But one thing was different for John, the good news was just on the horizon for soon Jesus himself would venture into the desert where John preaches and thereafter begin to preach good news and freedom and recovery and release and favor (Luke 4:18-19). This good news is just as real as the bad news yet the good news will cancel the bad news for those who believe and repent.

As we look over this message from John the Baptist in Luke 3, we must remember that for John the good news was that the Messiah is almost here. For us, the good news is that the Messiah has already come! John’s expectation is our reality.

Apply the Text:

The Value of Preparation

As we consider the opportunity to spend the next 40 days preparing ourselves to celebrate the resurrection, let us see the value in preparing for the plan of God as seen in John’s ministry. God did not raise up John to merely fulfill some obscure prophecy ahead of Jesus’ coming. Rather, the prophecy looked forward to a valuable work that John fulfilled. He would prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord did not

need John to clear the way for him. He was well able to come to us without hinderance. No, the ministry of John was not to open the way for the Messiah to come, but to prepare people to receive the coming Messiah. Preparing the way of the Lord was about preparing people, not roads. The Messiah, a most significant person, was coming and people needed to be ready to recognize, appreciate, and receive him.

The Purpose of Preparation

Resurrection Sunday, a most significant day, is coming and we need to be ready to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate the day. Christmas is so special to us partly because there is so much anticipation surrounding it. We start buying gifts, decorating, cooking, and preaching about the day weeks in advance. We should seriously consider how we might generate even more anticipation for Easter. John preached in such a way that generated anticipation for the Messiah. His ministry of preparation was planned by God for the purpose of helping people accept and receive the ministry of Jesus. In the same way, I believe our preparation for Easter will help us better accept and receive the message of the day.

The Process of Preparation

How can we prepare our hearts for Resurrection Sunday? First, we see in John's ministry of preparation a focus on repentance. As we journey towards the bloody cross and the empty tomb, it would be most appropriate for us to examine ourselves and repent of any activity or behavior that is not in harmony with the Kingdom of God. Paul instructs us to examine ourselves before we take communion, the remembrance and partaking of the sacrificial death of Jesus (1 Corinthians 11:28). This is appropriate preparation. Though we may be in relationship with God, forgiven, saved, and sanctified, we understand that repentance is an ongoing activity. Repentance is not only turning from persistent sin. Repentance is also ensuring we consistently turn towards God and not drifting even in a slightly different direction. Lent is a perfect time to make the course correction we need to be better aligned with God. Let us rend our hearts – demonstrate true repentance and desire to move in the direction of God.

A second aspect of preparation is remembering the bad news so that we might better appreciate the good news that will be proclaimed in the Resurrection message. Paul actually demonstrates this in Romans 5. As he discusses the blessings and benefits of salvation, he often reminds the readers of what they would be without the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Christ. We would be "powerless" (Romans 5:6), "sinners" (Romans 5:8), recipients of God's wrath (Romans 5:9), and "enemies of God" (Romans 5:10). Paul's purpose in reminding us of these uncomfortable realities is not to discourage us about who we were but to help us better appreciate who we are now in Christ Jesus. Now we are no longer powerless but enabled, we are no longer sinners but saved, we are no longer the recipients of God's wrath but the recipients of God's grace, and we are no longer the enemies of God but the children of God. As we prepare for the Resurrection, let us reflect upon why it was necessary for the Son of God to be sacrificed on a cross, buried in a tomb, and arise on the first day of the week. This was all necessary because there was a lot of bad news for me that I could not change . . . but now I have the good news of the Gospel.

Thirdly, as we look at John's message in Luke 3, the application that John gave to many was that you need to give up something to be prepared for the Messiah. Some were called upon to let go of an extra tunic. Others were called to stop being a bad neighbor. Some were called to give up certain actions or attitudes. John taught them to let go of what they should not have or could not keep so that they might take hold of what they would not lose, right relationship with God. As we prepare to go into Resurrection Day this year, is there something that we can identify that God is calling us to give up or let go? Perhaps it's not anything sinful but just something that must be relinquished to better follow Jesus. This is the time to let it go or to leave it behind. Let nothing hinder us on the way to the empty tomb. Let nothing be found in our hands or in our hearts that dishonors or belittles the great sacrifice of the cross and the great glory of the resurrected Lord.

Conclusion:

As we study the Word of God in the next 14 lessons, each one will help us be better prepared to celebrate and appreciate the resurrection. Some lessons will help us remember why we need to be saved. Some lessons will help us repent and turn more to God. Some lessons will help us relinquish that which need not be found in our lives. But even now, as we enter into this season of preparation, we are remembering, we are repenting, and we are relinquishing for the Kingdom and for the glory of resurrected Lord.

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