

Luke #10 – When God Revives His Church

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Luke - GIW

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Bible Text: Luke 3:1-20

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And the situation in the Church of Jesus Christ today in this part of the book of Luke, is certainly a message for you because I don't see how anyone could possibly deny that the situation was very bad in the days that Luke is describing. Now, I know we've had the Watergate scandal in the Nixon administration, which has caused worldwide questioning of the affairs of the Western world, and now, according to a recent article in the Wellington Evening Post, President John Kennedy, who is supposed to have had the charisma of the Sixties upon him, apparently carried on a secret adulterous liaison with the girlfriends of some of the mafia people. It's certainly enough to make you wonder about the affairs of state but it doesn't go as far as they did in the days of Imperial Rome. Anyone that would like to study the lives of the Caesars can soon enough find that out. And again, while we can say many things about the distressing condition of the Christian Church in the world today, I doubt if it has sunk to anything like the level that it was when Annas and Caiaphas were on the throne of Moses. They were politicians not religious leaders, and their whole strategy for the Church of God in that day was political, not religious; they were concerned to ingratiate themselves with Caesar in order that they might know his favor.

So try to imagine yourself living in a country governed by those terrible dictators in Rome, ruled locally by puppets like Pontius Pilate and Herod the King, with the Church itself under the dominion and domination of men like Annas and Caiaphas, and then remember that that was the time and that was the place where the greatest revivals in the history of the Church of God on earth were sent as a blessing from heaven. You have to remember too that the glory that had faded away was now 400 years in the past. There had been 400 silent years since the last prophet of God had been sent to his people, nearly as far back as the time of Luther and John Calvin is for us. And I can well imagine that there must have been people in that day saying, "Well, I don't see much hope, not with conditions like this. It's been too long and we are too far gone. The situation is truly hopeless." And there are many times when the people of God have sinfully talked like that. There are some talking like that today. There are some today who are quite sure that the time of the Antichrist is just around the corner and that the world will soon be shrouded in darkness and that no one will be able to move without the mark of the beast being put upon them and so on.

And yet time and again in the history of the Church of God, in such dark days as these, the Lord has stepped in and sent a great revival. It happened in Egypt 450 years after the people of God went down there under the guidance and care of Joseph. It happened in Babylon in the dark days of the captivity of God's people, you can read about it in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It happened again after a long period called the Dark Ages in Europe when the Lord God raised up the great reformers and who are we to say that it will not happen again by the grace of God also in these dark days? We should never say that the situation is hopeless because saying that is just the same as denying the glorious God. It is the same as denying that Christ sits upon the throne and that he reigns and that he is going to reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. It is the same as denying what the Bible says when it says we are more than conquerors through Christ who loved us. So however impossible it may look to us today that the great and wonderful springtime of the Church of God that we saw in the Protestant Reformation could come again, it is not impossible with God, not when he can go out in the wilderness and find a man like Moses tending the sheep and give him his word, not when he can find a man off there in Babylon like Daniel and give him his word, and not when he can find a monk struggling for peace with God in his cell by all manner of self-flagellation and the rest of it when he can come and give him his word, and not when he can find a man like John in the wilderness of Judea and give him his word, because time and again that's all it takes for God to revive his church. And it says here, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. So tonight I would like to ask you to consider two things vital to the revival of the Church. One of them is the message of John and the other is the consequent method.

Now the message of John can be summed up quite simply, he preached the baptism of repentance. He preached the baptism of repentance in order that there might be the forgiveness of sin. Now that's what the Greek text really is saying and for you to understand what a shock that was to the people of the Church of that day, you have to understand something about baptism. Many people perhaps feel that baptism was invented by John the Baptist, he's the man who's called the Baptist, isn't he? But as a matter of fact, baptism was well known long before John arrived on the scene. We now have massive studies on the whole history of baptism and we find that it goes back a long ways before the time of John the Baptist because, you see, in the ancient Roman Empire where the Jews had been scattered and the synagogues had been built, there were Gentiles who by the grace of God began to realize the difference. Why? They said, these people have the light, we're in darkness. These Israelites, they have a real revelation of God and we're just wandering around in the blindness and vanity of our minds and hearts. And so they would come and they would come to the synagogue and they would ask for instructions and they would desire that they might have a part with the people of God. Well, how could you bring a Gentile into the nation of God, the nation of Israel? Well one of the ways that they did it was by requiring water baptism. These people, in other words, had to confess, as it were, that they were a part of the filthy and sinful world of the Gentiles and they had to publicly take a bath, as it were, so as to signify before all men that they were aware of the fact that they were in need of cleansing of the filth and defilement of that Gentile world that they might then come in and also receive circumcision and become part of the kingdom of God. And so we read about the Jews in

the days of Paul, who compassed land and sea that he makes proselytes to the faith, and one of the requirements to symbolize the whole thing was the baptism and the washing away of the filth symbolized by this. But really John is saying to the Israelites themselves, "You people need to be baptized."

Now you, see that was the same as saying that there was no difference anymore between the Church and the world. That was the same as saying there's no difference anymore between Israel and the nations, no difference at all. The very filth that we've always associated with the Gentile world and those people that are idolaters and they live in darkness and immorality, that John was saying in the most dramatic possible way, was the accusation that he made against the Church and he punctuated that by calling the people a brood of vipers and serpents. Can you imagine anyone preaching like that today in most of our churches? Can you imagine what would happen in the Anglican Church of New Zealand if one of the bishops got up and actually felt and with all his heart proclaimed that message to the Anglicans of New Zealand, 92% of whom hardly ever darken the doors of the Church? Or the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, 600,000 statistically and about 80,000 that attend the churches in the land? Speaking in such a way, in other words, as to make it clear that the preacher doesn't regard them as the people of God at all, but rather as the filthy and defiled and unbelieving and ungodly people of this age. And that's exactly the way it is. There isn't any difference anymore. That's what's wrong. But John got up and told the truth. He was a man who could tell it like it is, as we say today.

And you'll notice the simple characterizations of the powerful preaching of John. First of all, he took his stand on the infallible word of God. There was no question in John's mind about the text of the prophet Isaiah from which he quotes. The word of God that came to John was the word of God contained in the scroll of Isaiah. It's right there in chapter 3 of the book of Luke. He quotes from it, "As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one crying in the wilderness," and then he quotes the words of Isaiah. You know, whenever God has reformed his Church and revived his Church, that's always the way it has been. The mists of skeptical treatment of the Bible suddenly evaporate and are gone, and there is a man who takes his stand like iron on the might and inerrancy of the Bible.

You go back and study the times of reformation in the Church and you will always find that there is no exception. There never has been and never will be a reformation in the Church of God if there is the least doubt about the authority and infallibility of the word of God upon which the preacher takes his stand. You can't have a revival and reformation with theological experience. You can't build a reformation of the Church on any kind of denial of the inerrancy of God. No, you can only do it when you go back and preach the word that God has given us.

You'll notice that John was characterized as a man who spoke in the spirit and power of Elijah. You might say, Elijah rides again. Ghost rider in the sky, Elijah rides again in the person of John the Baptist, because every reformation and revival is really a reincarnation of the past; it's a rediscovery and a revitalized realization of the great message of the past

just like it was when Abraham tried to learn the gospel from a member of his own congregation and turned his back on his own wisdom and went back to that glorious gospel. "For thus saith the Lord," said the prophet Jeremiah, "stand in the ways and see. Ask for the old paths where the good way is and walk therein. Then you will find rest for your souls." The reformation and revival of the church is always, in a fundamental sense, a going back to the past. Paul begets Augustine and Augustine begets Calvin.

You can sum it up, then, by two things that we find here in our text and the first is that there has to be genuine repentance in the heart or there is no forgiveness for sin. And you can never see that and you can never feel that unless there is first conviction of sin and John the Baptist was a great preacher when it came to conviction of sin. He brought out before men's eyes their depravity and their unworthiness. He made them see and feel until they cried out of their corruption and helplessness. If people were listening to a preacher like John today, I know very well what they would say because I've heard it plenty of times. They would say, "John, you're one-sided. You're too negative. You're too heavy. Too much emphasis on sin, John, not enough emphasis on grace. Too much denouncing of the people, not enough comfort. You should at least give equal time to the comfort and to the love and to the kindness and to the mercy, but here you are hammering away, hammering away at sin and the need of repentance for the forgiveness of sin." But John, you see, understood the situation.

Francis Schaeffer, the great missionary to the intellectuals in Europe, said the same thing. He said, "I have to spend 95% of my time convicting men of their sin." He says, "and it only takes 5%, especially with the intellectuals, to unfold the glories of the gospel." He said, "There's no use doing that until you've brought conviction of sin." He's right. He's dead right. This is John's way.

You see, the thing John knew and the thing that the religious leaders of that day had forgotten is that there is no peace for the wicked and there is no comfort for those who do not truly repent of their sin. The Westminster Assembly in the Larger Catechism points out that every minister of the gospel has the solemn obligation and duty to preach the doctrine of evangelical repentance. Not just faith in Christ, but also repentance, and the reason is because there is no real faith and there certainly is no forgiveness of sin until there is first, a heart-felt repentance. Not just, but a broken heart and a realization of the staggering enormity of our unworthiness before God.

So he emphasized that part of the gospel that needed most urgent emphasis and God was pleased to bring in sight the beginning of the great Reformation. You think a message like that would drive the people away, wouldn't you? No, the people came from all over the land, they came to John, and many, not few, were baptized for the remission of sin. What a glorious thing when the Lord God brings conviction of sin and brings men to seek and desire to get right again with their God.

Well, let me just say this, that in all the history of this nation it has only been that way. If you go back and study the annals of the Great Awakening in America, it was that way. First, God raised up men like Jonathan Edwards, who marvelously and with great power

preached the doctrine of repentance and brought conviction of sin. Can you picture that congregation of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton, Massachusetts? The people from one end to the other weeping, sobbing, sometimes out loud, and they couldn't stop because they wanted the mercy of God and then the rain of God's grace came down from heaven and flooded the hearts of His people. The way it's been, you see, in the history of our faith, when men are brought to know their bitter bondage like the children of Israel in the land of Egypt. When they are brought to know the bitterness of their bondage, then they cry out to the Lord and ask him to send deliverance. But there is no reformation and revival of the great sins when surgeons deal lightly with sin and just put a band-aid over the sore so that men do not cry out and do not learn the lessons that John has preached.

So quite simply, the message of John is the conviction of sin. Now the second thing I want you to look at for a moment is the method that came out of this message because you'll see quite clearly in this passage of the Bible that John's message determines his method. Now this might seem very unimportant to you, but this is at the root of much of the problem in the Church today. You see, John preached to the fundamental blindness of the people. He was skillful in getting at the fiddlies with sin. They covered their nakedness before John. Don't start to say within yourself, "We are the children of Abraham." You know, if there was going to be a great revival in the Reformed churches of the world today, that's exactly where you'd have to start. You would have to start by prying off the scab of a false kind of covenant theology, a kind of covenant theology that makes people feel safe because they are born of a genealogy of believers.

Well now, it's a wonderful thing to be a child of Abraham. Paul himself says, "What profit then is there of circumcision," and he says "much every way." Not a little thing to be born of a household of the faith, but the sad thing is that people can take that covenant theology and make it into a nice little protective society where everybody that's born in that society has a free ticket to heaven, one that says you can get in without a broken heart and without a heartfelt repentance and faith. And that isn't true. It never has been and it never will be and John knew what the trouble was. That's why he called them a brood of serpents. He wanted them to realize they were Satan's children, not God's children and Christ said amen to John. He said later in chapter 8 of the book of John, "You are of your father the devil," not of Abraham. And so John preached with a skillful scalpel to get at the festering wound. He warned them that the ax was even then being laid to the root..

You know, I saw some years ago in New England a very interesting sight. The physical descendants of the pilgrims were all dressed up in the garments of the pilgrims and they were enacting almost perfectly the scene that you would have seen there in about 1630 as the pilgrims in their big black hats and their big muskets walked off to attend the meeting house where the gospel was preached. But you know in 1630 they preached a mighty gospel in the meeting houses of New England and the people who were dressing up like the pilgrims today are Unitarian in their theology. They are as far away from the belief of the pilgrims as it is possible to be. So there you have the odd scene of the physical descendants of the pilgrims dressing up and acting like pilgrims when they were the enemies of the faith that brought those founding fathers of America in the 1620s.

Well, they need a message. Some what like a message that John brought to these people when he told them not to trust in their descent from Abraham and that the ax was being laid to the root. The second thing I want you to notice about John is that he had no preference for persons, and this, in my humble judgment, is the greatest scandal of the church of our day. If you are going to have a great revival today in the Church, if you are going to have a great evangelistic crusade in the Church, do you know what you do today? You make sure that the leaders of faith and Church are going to welcome your visit.

I remember some years ago when one of these evangelists that we have promoted today in the church was going to come to town and he said, "I won't come unless all of the churches are in harmony and unless prominent representatives of the various denominations are there on the platform with me." Well, that wasn't John's message and it wasn't John's method either to go and hold intimate services at the White House there in Jerusalem where no one was offended and no one was called a viper or a serpent. No, it wasn't like that. John the Baptist said the same thing to Herod that he said to the people. The little people came out and he said, "You brood of serpents. Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" But when he was in front of Herod, the supreme ruler of that area of the world, he said, "You are a sinner, Herod, and you have no right to that wife that you are living with."

It's tragic, isn't it, that some of our so-called leaders in the Church haven't had the courage to say that kind of thing at the White House. Maybe there wouldn't have been a Watergate scandal and maybe there wouldn't have been some other woman in President Kennedy's bed either. But, no, there hasn't been that kind of a method of evangelism at work. Can you imagine Elijah refusing to come to Mount Carmel unless the prophets of Baal agreed to appear on the platform with him? Can you imagine Martin Luther refusing to hold a meeting in Berlin unless one of the Pope's envoys appeared on the platform with him? That's the kind of a sorry situation that we've come to see in the Church.

The true gospel does not lead to that kind of method. It leads to the straightforward faithful and fearless proclamation that you find in a man like John. It might surprise some of you people to go back and read the writings of Luther. He also called the Pope a jackass. He wasn't afraid to use strong language when he was talking about the enemies of the gospel just like John the Baptist. It seems to be always true in the days when God raises up men of iron but then the time comes, you see, then that our faith is too weak and our conviction too wishy-washy if we don't speak faithfully to the high and mighty as he is.

Well, when God is ready to reform and revive his Church he does not need a great organization. He does not need Hollywood actresses and actors on the platform to give it a boost and to bring it a little glamour and so other people will come in too, and he doesn't need some star golfer who plays golf on the Lord's day to come and tell how wonderful it is to be a Christian and how the Lord blesses you with thousands and thousands of dollars if you become a Christian. He doesn't need anything like that, the

Lord doesn't. No, what the Lord needs is a little man like John who really has the word, the word of God and who is willing by the grace of God to proclaim one message to the high and mighty and the same message to the lowly and obscure like John the Baptist did without the help of any organization, without the backing of any clergyman, without anyone but God and his word. And hasn't it always been that way? What did Moses have, did he have an army when he went down to the land of Egypt? What did Martin Luther have, did he have legions behind him to face the Pope? No, he had the word of God and the courage to faithfully proclaim it and that is what always brings reformation and revival to the Church.

Well, beloved, I think we need a great revival, a mighty revival and reformation in the Church. And I hope that having seen this portion of the word of God you'll realize that it's not going to come by gimmicks. You know, John was a fairly young person. He waited in the wilderness until he was thirty, thirty and a half about. He waited until he had the word of God. You young people do the same. Don't fall for gimmicks and flash-in-the-pan solutions to the problem of this age. Wait until you have the word of God and then step up and have your say. That's the way in which God will reform and revive his church today. Not by gimmicks. Not by man-made methods. But by some faithful servant who really has to wait, like Paul, who once said this to the Ephesians, "Pray on my behalf, brethren, that utterance may be given to me, To open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel of Christ, That I might be enabled of God to speak boldly as I ought to speak." And that's what we need today, men who will be bold and faithfully preach the gospel.

Well, do you want it? Do I want it? I wonder. I wonder if we really do want someone the likes of John to get up and hurt us with that word of God that can also cleanse away our sins. May we take our hearts and may the Lord our God give us the grace to say, "Yea Lord, may the set time come to revive and reform your Church." Amen.

We do thank thee, O Lord, for this portion of your wonderful word and we pray that the wonderful lessons of the ministry of John, that faithful witness, might be pressed upon our hearts. Lord, we need the likes of John today. All of us. Lord, please raise up such a man to reform and revive thy Church. We ask it in Christ's name. Amen.