

Our Greatest Need (Luke 3:1-14)

1. The Context of Repentance (v.1-2)

- Luke, as a historian, lists seven rulers and leaders that cover the political, governmental, and religious oversight of the Roman occupation of Israel (v.1-2).
- Luke's audience in the mid-first century would have been familiar with these names and would have intimate knowledge of their policies.
- Scholars are unsure whether Annas and Caiaphas were Levites. It appears that Rome appointed these High Priests.
- There was a state-sponsored (Rome) government where all authorities were corrupt, from the federal (Tiberias Caesar) to the state (Pilate).
- It was an exceedingly dark time of corruption, violence, and self-indulgence.
- Despite the privation and exploitation of the populace from those in authority, God is in the business of advancing His kingdom.
- When people feel powerless against godless forces that appear insurmountable, God is still at work, bringing salvation.
- He brings salvation by raising leaders, like John the Baptist, to call the people to repentance.

2. The Call of Repentance (v.2-6)

- The nation of Israel had experienced four hundred years of silence from the LORD. There was no additional prophetic revelation since the prophet Malachi.
- Despite the paganism and corruption of the Roman authorities, the "word of God" came to John (v.2). This is not surprising, as John was filled by the Holy Spirit even from the womb and was appointed to be a prophet of the Most High (Lk. 1:15, 76-77).
- The "word of God" came to John while he was in the wilderness. Matthew informs us in his synoptic account that John "wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt and ate grasshoppers and wild honey" (Matt. 3:4).
 - John is like Elijah in the wilderness (2 Kgs.1:8; 2:4-11). The wilderness is where God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, bringing them to the Promised Land. The nation was in a spiritual exile, where the wilderness represented testing, trials, and grace.
- John was a traveling evangelist, proclaiming a baptism of repentance.
- Baptism of Repentance (v.3)
 - Repentance in Greek means to "change the mind." This "change of mind" results in a change of behavior.
 - The Jews had no desire to repent since "Abraham's blood" flowed through them (v.8). Since they were "God's people," all they had to keep were the sacrifices and the law of Moses.
 - For the Jews, only Gentiles repent and are baptized. Baptism before John's ministry was strictly a ceremonial washing for both Jew and Gentile.
 - Ceremonially, Jewish men and women would "wash" if they became unclean (Lev. 15).
 - Proselyte Jews (converted Gentiles) had to "take a bath" to wash themselves of their "Gentile filth" and be circumcised.
 - The rite of baptism John introduced is a radically new concept unseen before. This is a preparatory baptism that John temporarily instated through the word of the Lord, which prepared the people for the Messiah. This baptism became obsolete with the inauguration of the New Covenant at Pentecost (Acts 2; 19:1-5).

- John is called "John the Baptist" because of his unique preparatory baptism that precedes the baptism of the New Covenant.
- John's ministry, as a herald, inaugurated Isaiah's prophecy (Isa. 40:3-5):
 - "Prepare the way of the Lord" (v.4-6). This is Jesus! (1:43, 76; 2:11). When a king or foreign dignitary would visit a town or city, the streets would be cleared and even expanded to allow the maximal pomp and splendor of the king.
 - This "Lord" is full of so much glory that mountains need to be leveled, and valleys need to be raised (v.5). He needs all that room!
 - John, as a herald, is to remove all "rocks and stumbling blocks" so that their hearts can be prepared for the salvation of God (v.6).
 - The "rough places, mountains, and valleys" is also a metaphor for the humbling of the prideful, the encouragement of the downcast, and those on a crooked path being straightened out.
 - John's message to the people's curiosity is simple: repent and be baptized.

3. The Clarity of Repentance (v.7-14)

- Through John's preaching (v.3), people came out to be baptized by him (v.7). Three groups met him near the river Jordan: the crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers.
- John, in loving urgency:
 - A. rebuked them in their hypocrisy (v.7-8): he calls them a "brood of vipers." They are like deceptive snakes (Gen. 3), who only want to be baptized to escape the flames of hell. Baptism has no salvific power. These people want to be baptized and then return to their sinful lifestyle. They rely on external rituals, rites, and tradition (children of Abraham and baptism) to escape the coming judgment.
 - B. warned them of the coming judgment in their hypocrisy (v.9): these people have not kept the "fruit in keeping with repentance" (v.8). Despite their claims of religion, there is no fruit in their lives. While they had Abraham's blood, they did not possess Abraham's faith. Fruit is not made but born. Even though repentance itself does not save, it is a necessary response to the grace of God. The request of the people to be baptized was carnal and superficial. The proverbial divine "ax" is a picture of divine judgment (Isa. 10:33-34; Ezek. 31:12; Dan. 4:14).

The people ask, "what shall we do?" (v.10). John gives practical and ethical directions to the:

- A. Crowds (v.11): share your food and personal belongings with those in need.
- B. Tax collectors (v.12-13): these were both Jews and Gentiles who were notorious for fraud. There were two levels of taxation: the direct tax (heads of households) and excise/customs tax on anything sold. Tax collectors entered a "bidding war" with Roman officials. Whoever could offer the highest customs tax received authority to collect taxes; whatever they charged above the contractual agreement, they could keep themselves. The touch of a tax collector rendered a Jew unclean, and the Jews were forbidden from receiving money from tax collectors, even in alms.
- C. Soldiers (v.14): Jewish mercenaries hired by Herod Antipas who never fought for the Jewish people, used their authority to subjugate the Jews, and robbed others to supplement their income.

John did not call them to quit their occupation and lifestyle but instead summoned them to have a God-centered ethic in refusing to extort their fellow man to fulfill the Law of Moses (Matt. 22:36-40). This is the "fruit of repentance." He commands them to live out their repentance where God providentially has placed them. If their repentance is genuine, they will have "good" fruit (v.9) as they "re-align" their lives with the purposes of God.