

Prepare for Jesus

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[0 : 0 0] Let's ask God again for his help to get today's passage into us. Father, we always need your help. We are people whose minds are often blocked, whose hearts are dull.

So Holy Spirit, would you indeed work in us so that we would truly listen, truly hear what you want to say to us this morning. Amen. Help us to be soft. Help us to be receptive. Help us to be humble.

Help us to be teachable. Help us to want to honour and glorify you by obeying you in all that we hear today. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now, some of you may recall Ivy Chiang, who recently left us to pursue a two-year research position in Sydney. Before she left for Australia, one of Ivy's jobs here was to organise academic conferences.

And she once told me about a conference for which she had responsibility, in which she had to plan for the visit of our Sarawak Premier. And let's just say it's not for the faint-hearted.

[1 : 1 0] After fixing a date on which the Premier was available, her team had to design and submit the conference flyers to the State Protocol Unit, who had to check that things like the positioning of his picture, the formatting of his name, the dimensions of the Sarawak crest, and so on, were appropriate.

Otherwise, it couldn't be distributed and had to be redesigned. Then, they had to have meeting after meeting with various people, such as the police, to manage, to arrange for traffic control, to arrange for security measures, and even a bomb squad to sweep the venue beforehand.

Or the Sarawak State Health Department, who had to provide an ambulance on standby, should there be a medical emergency of any sort. The manual of the hotel had to be scrutinised, as there were certain dietary requirements that had to be catered for.

And there had to be some communication with the media, just in case the Premier wanted to have a press conference. Of course, we haven't even talked about the internal coordination yet, by the MCs and the AV team and the ushers and so on.

Basically, her entire year was more or less consumed by preparations for this big day. The message is clear. If someone important like the Premier is coming, you need to be prepared.

[2 : 4 2] Well, that's what today's passage is all about. How to prepare for the coming of a VVIP. Except, in this case, it's not just any VVIP, but the M-I-P-O-A, the most important person of all, the Lord Himself.

Now, in the Bible, the Lord comes quite a number of times. He comes in Genesis 12 to Abraham, just after the Tower of Babel incident, promising he will work through Abraham's descendants to once again bless the world.

He comes in Exodus 3, appearing in a burning bush to Moses, commissioning him as his instrument to redeem his people out of slavery.

But the most significant coming of all, of course, is the one we've been hearing over the past two months, the coming of the Lord in the person of Jesus Christ. We've been hearing of Jesus' birth, and indeed, last week, we saw him as a 12-year-old coming to his father's house.

And the next time we meet Jesus in Luke's Gospel, we'll see him as an adult, ready to launch into his ministry. But just before we meet the adult Jesus firsthand, Luke wants to prepare us through the ministry of Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist.

[4 : 15] Now, you might say, wait a minute, that's fine for John's time, but what does it have to do with us?

I mean, hasn't Jesus already come 2,000 years ago? Aren't we a little late to the party? Why do we need preparation? Well, yes, you're right.

But don't forget, the Bible tells us that actually, there is one more significant coming of the Lord, and that is the coming of Jesus at the end of this age.

So that means today, there is still preparation work to be done. We don't want to get caught out. If Jesus is coming again, we better be ready.

So let's turn our Bibles to Luke chapter 3, for as we examine John's ministry here today, we will learn how to prepare for the coming of the Lord. And to do that, we're going to look at his ministry in three parts, the momentous event, the urgent exhortation, and the necessary encounter.

[5 : 28] So firstly, the momentous event. Notice how Luke begins, verses 1 and 2. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, tetrarch of Eturia and Trachonitis, and Lysanias, tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

So at first glance, it seems like all Luke is doing is specifying the time period. It sounds a little like saying, in the year that Anwar Ibrahim became prime minister, Benjamin Baru became an elder of this church.

So let me see. Oh, okay, okay, 2022. Got it. But if that is all Luke wanted to do, why be so long-winded about it?

Why not just mention Tiberius and stop there? You wouldn't say, oh, Ben became an elder the same year that Anwar Ibrahim became prime minister, and Lawrence Wong became Singapore's deputy prime minister, and nine years after, Pope Francis became pope.

Pope Francis, it's redundant. So why say all this? There must be another reason. What could it be? Well, imagine that you're listening to the radio when you hear an announcement that declares, okay, in the year, Anwar Ibrahim was prime minister of Malaysia, and Joe Biden was president of the United States, and Xi Jinping, the president of China, you got that right?

[7 : 13] So and so was appointed pastor of a small church in Long Lama. Now, when put this way, it is the seemingly insignificant pastor who is being placed at the center in contrast to the usual headline grabbers.

That's what Luke is doing here. He lists seven different people, all of whom would have made it into the list of the 50 most important people today in the Jerusalem edition of Time magazine, and basically says, but the most important person I really want you to know today is John.

John, who has no title. John, who has no office. John, who is simply the son of another nobody.

It's Zachariah. John, who has no idea of the people. So that should make us wonder, why? Why spotlight John? Well, notice one other thing. Luke doesn't just spotlight a person, but an event.

Look again at the end of verse 2. The word of God came to John. And when we go and read some of the stories about how Old Testament prophets started their ministry, we'll discover this is how they are usually caught.

[8 : 40] You know, if you flip to the first half of your Bibles, you'll read, the word of the Lord came to Elijah. The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. And now, the word of the Lord came to John.

Luke is signaling to us that like them, John is a prophet. Just imagine that after more than 400 years of silence, God's word comes to him and threw him to others.

And in the Bible, when God speaks, it doesn't matter if you are a king or a ruler, you better listen. But he's not just any prophet and his words not just any normal words.

Luke says, verse 4, he is none other than the voice of Isaiah 40, verse 3. He is the voice of the one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

In other words, he is bringing news of a momentous event. And that's made especially obvious when we double-click Isaiah 40. You see, often, whenever you see an Old Testament quotation being directly introduced in the New Testament, the writer expects you to know the context of that Old Testament quote or at least to look it up.

[10 : 07] So, if we take the time to look up Isaiah 40, which we read earlier, what will we discover? Well, we'll discover that the prophet is looking ahead to a time when God's people are doing poorly.

They are weak, they are in captivity, their great city of David, Jerusalem, is in ruins. Nothing looks good. But into this situation, God says, comfort.

Comfort my people. You know what's coming? Payment for sins, Isaiah 40 verse 2. Why? Because look who's coming, the mighty, sovereign Lord, Isaiah 40 verse 10.

The one who tends his flock like a shepherd and gathers the lambs into his arms. Isaiah 40 verse 11. So, this is a voice proclaiming comfort and hope and life.

And Luke tells us the voice of Isaiah 40 is here in the wilderness, proclaiming that very message.

[11 : 22] So, that can only mean one thing. God is on his way. And of course, in the context of Luke's gospel, that can only refer to one person.

Jesus. This is the momentous event. You see, when you reveal that list of names again in verses 1 and 2, well, none of them are good news, really.

Tiberius Caesar was a paranoid and intolerant leader. Pontius Pilate didn't think much of the Jews and regularly stole from the temple treasury. We've already heard a month or so ago how Herod was an evil tyrant who wasn't afraid to kill even teenagers.

Even the high priest Annas and Caipha seem only interested in position. Now, these are the most prominent and influential people of that day. So, John's world was truly a wilderness.

wilderness. It's unlivable, inhospitable, unpleasant. It's not a world that you really want to live in. But now, Jesus is here.

[12 : 33] Now, verse 6, all people will see God's salvation. Even the Caesars and the Pilots and the Herods of the world have to pay attention.

This is the momentous event of world history. And it is at this point we do well to pause and ask ourselves, do we find the same significance in what Luke finds significant?

Now, here's one way to find out. If I were to ask you, what piece of news do you see today as being more important?

The election of Anwar Ibrahim as our new Prime Minister? Or the fact that we can celebrate Christmas? How would you answer? Or, if I were to ask you, what do you think was the more newsworthy event of the past few days?

The announcement of our new cabinet? Or the sharing of God's gospel at Hope Explored on Thursday evening? I wonder how we would answer.

[13 : 45] Because if we are honest, I suspect many of us secretly think, actually, it's the former. Ayah, Christmas, why is that news? I mean, comes every year.

And just a few nobodies meeting in a home to hear about Jesus. What's so special about that? But Luke wants to challenge our way of thinking.

He wants us to understand that there is nothing on BBC, or wherever you get your news from that can be more significant than the coming of Jesus. And there is nothing more newsworthy than whenever people hear the gospel.

These are momentous events. Even if Christmas at KEC or Hope Explored will never ever make it to the front page of the New Streets Times.

But this is where our attention should be captured. Where our conversations should be excited about.

[14 : 48] It is where we should find ourselves motivated. You see, the election of Anwar Ibrahim might be of interest to Malaysians, but probably not to Argentinians.

But when Jesus comes again, as he will one day, it will be an event of truly global significance. It will matter to every single individual on this planet.

And it will be great, because that means our present world, which is also pretty much wilderness like, with all its wars and famines and abuses, will finally be fixed.

us. And so if this is the momentous event, how can we be prepared? Well, by making sure that we all hear the word of Jesus, about Jesus, whether we are non-Christians or Christians, it makes no difference.

We all need to hear God's word proclaimed to us. And so actually, it is this time every week that we should treasure the most.

[16 : 06] And so here is the question, do we believe that? Or when your friends look at you, do they think you are more excited about politics than about Christmas? Well, here in the opening verses of Luke chapter 3, God challenges us to reframe our view of what is significant.

And it is this momentous event that brings us to the second part of John's ministry, the urgent exhortation, the urgent exhortation.

John is the Isaiah 40 voice proclaiming the coming of Jesus, but notice what message he specifically brings, verse 3. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Repentance is his major theme. Verse 5 captures the same idea. You see, if a VIP is on his way, travelling through hill country, which is what Judea is like, now, how would you prepare for his arrival?

Well, you would want to fill the valley so that he won't tumble down unexpectedly down a valley. You want to level the mountains and the hills so that there will be no steep climbs for him to navigate.

[17 : 31] You want the crooked roads to be straight and the rough ways smoothen. And John picks up on that imagery and says, that's basically the gist of my message.

God is coming to offer salvation to all. But, there's preparation that needs to be made, and so, you would want to get rid of every crookedness in your life.

You would want to straighten your lives out. In other words, you would want to repent. For, if you're not prepared, though you see God's salvation, you won't receive it.

Instead, verse 7, all you'll face is God's wrath. And that's why John urgently exhorts us, make sure you're ready to receive God's salvation, and the way you do so is by repenting.

But the problem is sometimes we don't feel the urgency. We think, oh well, maybe I can repent later, but not now, there's still plenty of time.

[18 : 40] That is the kind of attitude John discerns in many who were listening to him. That's why he says, verse 9, the axe is already at the root of the trees.

The axe is not still in the shed, it is already in God's hand, about to swing. So act now, because the time is short. It's why he resorts to such strong language in verse 7.

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? He needs to shake them out of their complacency. And so he says, you snakes, you're basically children of the devil.

Sure, you pretend to be children of the light, coming to enjoy all my sermons, but since you haven't shown any inclination to change, you're not really taking God's word all that seriously.

But you need to. God's wrath is coming. So if that's you, spring into action, verse 8, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

[19 : 52] Do you feel the urgency? John says, don't delay, show the fruit. You see, what is true repentance? Let me tell you what it isn't first.

Repentance is not regret, although regret can accompany repentance. repentance. It's not just about feeling sorrow for something you have or haven't done.

Rather, what lies behind repentance is the idea of turning and returning. Repentance, in other words, has the element of action.

It's to leave your wrongdoing behind, turn around from it, and move on in a Godward direction. It's going in the reverse direction of your previous journey.

It is a change of mind, leading to a change in lifestyle. A life rooted in true repentance produces fruit.

[20 : 56] So John wants us to display true repentance. What he doesn't want us is to presume. Verse 8 again, and do not begin to say to yourselves, we have Abraham as our father.

Now, don't think, John says to his audience, who is Jewish at this point, that just because your ancestry goes all the way back to Abraham, and that your history ties you to God's people, and to the Abrahamic promises of blessing, and all of that, that you're fine.

And don't think, God says to us, that just because you are from Sarawak, just because Sarawak is the most Christian state in the country, just because you have Christmas parades that are well attended, that that must mean you are in God's good books.

The question is, long after the Christmas parade has ended, is your life shaped by repentance? Or don't say, hey, I've been going to church since I was a kid, my parents went to church since they were kids, my grandparents have been going to church since they were kids, so we are all fine.

After all, verse 8 again, out of these stones, God can raise up children for Abraham. God doesn't depend on your heritage to make you his child.

[22 : 24] What matters is your fruit of repentance. For in verse 9, that is the one thing God looks for. And if he doesn't see it, down comes the axe.

As Warren Rearsby writes, God gets to the root of things and is not impressed with religious profession that does not produce fruit.

So this, of course, raises the question, what does this fruit look like? Well, at this point, perhaps we're expecting John to say something religious. Go, read your Bibles for 30 minutes every day.

Go, make sure you increase your synagogue or your church attendance by 50% next month. But in verses 10 to 14, John shows us repentance is ethical in nature.

It does not simply consist of religious duty or having nice personal qualities, but specific obedience to God's specific commands.

[23 : 31] repentance. It's not just about how you treat God, but about how you treat others. More specifically, your attitude to money and possessions is a great indicator of how repentant you truly are.

So let's examine ourselves even as we look at these verses. How are we doing? Well, God says, first of all, that a repentant person is a generous person, verse 11.

Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has one, and anyone who has food should do the same. So how are our hands today?

Are they open, or are they tight-fisted? This week, as I was pondering on these verses, I was told that an anonymous person had kindly given me a love gift.

As it so happened, I had been recently thinking about another Christian ministry that I knew was in need. And so as soon as I heard that this person wanted to give me this love gift, I realized what the Lord required of me.

[24 : 41] I needed to give at least some of it away to this ministry. I had gotten two shirts, as it were, and one of them was not ultimately meant for me.

Second of all, a repentant person is an honest person. The tax collectors asked Jesus, what shall we do?

And he answers, verse 13, don't collect any more than you are required to. In those days, there were two kinds of taxes, direct and indirect.

And local tax collectors were given the task of collecting the indirect taxes, the direct taxes went straight to the empire, right? And they got to decide how much to collect. So you can imagine such a system being ripe for abuse, since they could always charge a little extra and pocket the difference.

But Jesus says, the proof that you've changed is whether you continue doing that or not. It's seen in the way you now fill up your tax forms or your expense claims.

[25 : 52] Does it show fruit? And third of all, a repentant person is a content person. This time Jesus addresses the soldiers, verse 14, and tells them, don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely.

Be content with your pay. Given your power, he says to the soldiers, it will be so easy for you to use it for leverage and intimidate others for your own benefit.

And given that many of your fellow soldiers were probably doing this, it would be easy to rationalise, wouldn't it? Everyone does it.

It's just the way the system works. I don't get paid much. I need to feed my family. But the repentant soldier rejects that reasoning. He says, what I have is from the hand of God and that is what I accept.

And so as we look at all these verses, here's the challenge from God's word. What does my current attitude towards money and possessions show about my spiritual state?

[27 : 09] Now, what is interesting is that Jesus doesn't tell the soldier or the tax collector, at least not immediately, quit your jobs. Get out of the Roman system.

You see, repentance doesn't necessarily mean a retreat from society. Now, sometimes repentance does require a radical separation, but often repentance looks more like going back to your families, to your schools, to your workplaces, to your old life, but living it in a new way, whatever the consequences.

Repentance looks like Zacchaeus, a tax collector, who later on in Luke 19 will pay back those he has cheated. Repentance looks like Judah, who in the Old Testament, after being the one who sold his brother into slavery, offered himself as a slave years later so that another brother would not be taken.

Repentance will do what it takes to make things right, and to keep pursuing the path of righteousness. that's what repentance looks like.

And when we repent, did you know this? Others benefit, others are blessed, they get assured. And I hope this also makes clear that true repentance cannot be reduced to a single act at the beginning of the Christian life.

[28 : 42] A few months ago, another Christian, not from our church, came to have a conversation with me about a few things, and she told me that at her church, a lot of the young people were asking, isn't it enough that we just put our hands up during an altar call, accept Jesus, and that's it?

Why do we need to say sorry to God after that? Isn't the deal done? But that is a complete misunderstanding of repentance. Repentance is not a one-off, but a daily affair for the Christian.

It is a tree that bears fruit in every season. All of life is repentance, and John urgently exhorts us to repent.

But maybe that leaves us feeling a little deflated. We know that you and I, for the rest of our lives, are called to turn away from our sin.

But maybe that leaves us with the same question that keeps echoing throughout the middle section of this passage. What should we do? You see, I think a lot of the time, we know what we should do.

[29 : 57] We know we should be generous and honest and content. We know we should make godly decisions. But we find that we can't or don't always do what we should do.

And so we ask, what should we do? Not so much because we need more information, not because we are ignorant necessarily, but as a way of indicating our sense of powerlessness.

We feel overwhelmed, we don't feel in control, we want to do the right thing, but we don't always. So we find ourselves crying out, what should we do?

And that brings us to the third part of John's ministry, the necessary encounter. Now, John's ministry must have been fairly impressive. It was certainly impressive enough, verse 16, that some people were wondering if he was the Messiah himself.

But John says, yes, I preach a message of repentance and yes, I can baptize you, but in the end, the words I offer have no power on their own.

[31 : 10] And the water that I pour over you in the end only makes you wet. My ministry gives you a picture, but it doesn't give you any power, certainly no real power to change.

But don't despair, because verse 17, one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

This one, John says, is the one I'm pointing to, the one who can transform. And my ministry is all about preparation, remember?

So I'm just preparing you to go to the one who truly can change you, because this one will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

in Ezekiel 36, God had promised a day when he would put his spirit in his people, cleanse them and grant them a new heart. And John says, that day has arrived with the first coming of Jesus.

[32 : 19] He alone can do the inner cleansing that is required, that John cannot do simply by water. And the ministry of the Holy Spirit is not only like water that cleanses, but fire that purges.

John draws on imagery found in Isaiah chapter 4, which also describes the ministry of the Spirit as one that cleanses and purges by water and fire.

And he says to us, you know what? That's the ministry of Jesus. And so Jesus alone is the one whom we must go to. He is the necessary encounter we must have.

And guess what? That is actually what true repentance is all about. You see, if I had just stopped at verse 14, it is quite possible we may end up with an inadequate definition of repentance.

We might simply think of repentance as a turning away from our sin. And if that is all we see repentance as, then we will set ourselves up for a lifetime of frustration as we try and fail, try and fail, try to turn away from our sin and fail again and wallow in a sense of shame and failure.

[33 : 40] But there are two halves to a definition of true repentance. Repentance is not just turning away from our sin, but a turning towards Jesus.

You see, every day we're going to fall short, we're going to mess up, we're going to stumble and fall, and so every day that means we have to keep repenting.

But that means every day we get to run to Jesus. We get to look at his face, we find his pardoning grace, and we find all we need to get up again and live a new way.

In question 87 of the Westminster Short-Til Catechism, the question is asked, what is repentance unto life? And when you look at the answer on the screen, it talks about hating our sins and turning from it, it's all in there.

But as part of the answer, it also says this, repentance involves the apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ. Isn't that beautiful?

[34 : 54] You see, the catechism gets it. Repentance is about turning to the one who loves us and has mercy on us and saves us and washes us and refines us.

So prepare for Jesus' second coming in the future by going to him now in the present. Turn for sin, turn to him.

And it is urgent and necessary to do that because look at verse 17. His winnowing fog is in his hand to clear his trashing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn.

But he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. When Jesus comes, John says there will be a necessary division, just as Simeon mentioned two weeks ago.

Some will welcome and turn to him and find sanctuary like wheat in a barn. But for others, they will say to Jesus, nah, I don't want you.

[35 : 58] But that would mean they are becoming like the shaft that burns up. And as we read on in Luke's gospel, we'll see both responses come up again and again. We already get a hint of it in verses 19 and 20 where the word of God rebukes Herod, who doesn't like it.

And so he imprisons the messenger. He doesn't want to repent. He takes the other side. You see, in the end, Jesus' ministry of baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire has a two-fold effect.

I like how the 19th century preacher Alexander McLaren explains it. I put it on your outline. He says, And so John pleads with us today, take this seriously.

as you encounter Jesus in his word now, what is your response? You see, every time God's word is proclaimed to us, we have a choice to make.

We could just switch off, decide nothing changes, and slowly but surely move another inch away from Jesus. Or we could be humble, ready to listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and turn back to him.

[37 : 40] Someone was sharing with me recently that as he's been reading God's word in his quiet times, he noticed that more and more the word was not coming alive to him in the same way it used to.

And as he reflected on that, he realized that it could be partly because he has stopped listening and depending on Jesus. His heart was growing harder. But thankfully, he was sensitive to what was happening, and so he humbly came before God again and asked for his forgiveness and his help.

What about you today? Is your heart growing hard towards Jesus? Have you stopped getting yourself ready for him? If that is you, then hear the word of the Lord, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

So what I want us to do now is to have a moment of silence and take stock of where you are in your walk with the Lord. Do you need to repent? Do you need to turn from something?

To let go of something? To move away from something that you know is harming your relationship with God? Do you need to rethink the way you treat others? Or what your relationship with your money and your possessions are like?

[38 : 59] God, so I'll give you a minute to do that now, and then after that we'll say the prayer of confession together and then we'll get ready to take the Lord's Supper. And in the Lord's Supper, we will hear that good news that Jesus has shed his blood for us.

So let's just take a moment now, a minute, and then the prayer of confession will appear on the screen and we'll say that together. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Well, let us prepare our hearts to pray to the Lord.

The words, we can be fleshed up on the screen. This is a prayer based on Psalm 51, a great psalm of repentance. Let's pray this together.

Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love. Wash us thoroughly from our iniquity, and cleanse us from our sin.

[41 : 02] For we know our transgressions and our sin is ever before us. Against you, you only, have we sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Create in us a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within us. Cast us not away from your presence, but restore to us the joy of your salvation, that we may offer our lives as a sacrifice of praise to you.

Amen. We'll hear the good news as summarized for us in Colossians 1, verse 13-14. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

That is the gospel. gospel. . . .

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