

“John the Baptist: Preparing People for Jesus”

Luke 1, 3; John 3

Well it's that time of year that we start decorating our houses with Christmas things. One of the things many people have and like to put out is their nativity set, with all the mini statues of the main characters surrounding the birth of Jesus. There's Joseph, Mary, usually some shepherds, often an angel, some animals and the wise men are usually thrown in there or maybe set aside on a shelf because technically they weren't here that night. But there's one person no one includes in their nativity set even though you can't have Jesus' birth without him. And that's John the Baptist. I mean shouldn't we have statues for Zechariah, Elizabeth and 6 month old John some-where in the background? When we read Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3 we read that the prophesied messenger has to come first to prepare the way for the Lord. John the Baptist. And Jesus doesn't begin His ministry until He is baptized by John the Baptizer.

So if John the Baptist has to come before Jesus, then John is essential to the Christmas story even though he doesn't get a place in our nativity sets. But two babies would be counter productive and it fits John well, and as we'll see a powerful illustration for us, why he's not there.

John and Jesus' births and ministries are inseparable as we come to the Gospel of Luke. Luke weaves both their stories together until John baptizes Jesus and then John's ministry goes into the background. But if Jesus needed some-one to prepare people for His coming – and He is going to come back one day, then there is still a need for people like you and I today to prepare others for Jesus' return. How can we learn to prepare people for Jesus today from John who prepared people for Jesus' birth?

Let's go to Luke 1 and revisit Gabriel's appearance to Zechariah in the temple. The story is familiar. Zechariah, a priest, is married to a priest's daughter. Both are righteous and obey God's Word. “But they had no children” (1:7). Sadly they would have been gossiped about in that culture. Certainly, in people's thinking, theirs was the perfect marriage. They should be blessed with many children, especially boys who would continue Zechariah's priestly line. People would have wondered ‘what did they do wrong that God has not blessed them with children’? They hadn't done anything wrong. God had a unique plan for them.

Zechariah's turn to serve at the temple for 2 weeks came since it was the family line of Abijah's term. Each day lots were thrown to determine who would burn the incense in the Holy Place right outside the Holy of Holies where the Ark sat. There were enough priests that your turn may never come, so it was the highlight of your priestly ministry. Going in to burn incense before the presence of God and pray on Israel's behalf, Zechariah is startled by the presence of an angel (Gabriel were are later told) who says to him, God has indeed answered your prayer. Which prayer? Both prayers. The prayer for the Messiah to come and for a son for he and Elizabeth. This son would be the one prophesied in Is. 40 and Malachi 3-4 (quoted in v.17) to prepare the way for the Lord. What is obvious about God's promise regarding a messenger who comes before Jesus is the underlying fact that

People Need to hear About Jesus **(Luke 1:15-17)**

Why do people need to hear about Jesus? Why is He so important that God interrupts history to send an angel to tell an old priest he and his wife are going to have a miraculous birth, followed by

an incredible sign (of judgment – Zechariah’s silence) so that people will know Jesus is coming?
Gabriel says of John in v.16

¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

If Israel needs restoration of relationships – especially with God – that implies their relationship with God and each other are broken and by telling people about Jesus their broken relationships can be fixed. We’ll come back to this passage shortly but let’s jump to Zechariah’s song at John’s birth in vv.68-79.

Once Zechariah writes down at John’s circumcision ‘His name will be John’, God releases his stuck tongue (because he doubted Gabriel’s words and now bursts out into song). The song has 2 parts: Vv. 68-75 are about what Jesus will do for us; redeem us and ultimately bring hope to Israel based on God’s promises through Abraham, one day resulting in removal of God’s enemies.

Vv. 76-79 are about John’s role in all this. So through John we learn what we need to share about Jesus as well. Most importantly people

Need the knowledge of salvation (1:76-77a)

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation

People don’t necessarily know what it means to be saved. Many people have been misinformed that we will all be in God’s presence when we die because we are all good. Or others think that their religion gets them in. But if this know-ledge concerning Jesus doesn’t match up with their religion then they are misinformed. But, some object, they are so sincere, so dedicated? Listen to Paul’s words in Romans 10:

Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.

So Paul says, his own people don’t have proper knowledge of God even though they have the Old Testament. They chose to believe parts of it and rejected those parts that clearly spoke of Jesus as the Messiah. Zealous and sincere – yes, but misguided. Jesus said the same thing to the Samaritan woman in John 4. Samaritans only held that the Books of Moses were authoritative but Jesus said to her:

You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews.

Jesus makes no apologies for the whole truth of the Word of God because that’s the only way people can be saved. What knowledge do they need?

They need to know they are sinners in need of forgiveness (1:77b)

Zechariah further sang, “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,”

Salvation indicates needing to be saved. Saved from what? The consequence of unforgiven sins. So that knowledge comes through Jesus who somehow makes forgiveness of sins possible. And we know He does by offering His body on the cross for sins as God's payment since Jesus was a perfect sacrifice and the Word of God says without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

That creates a bit of a dilemma. If most people think they don't have a broken relationship with God and that they are unaware of the knowledge of salvation in Jesus, that most likely means they don't know they are sinners in need of forgiveness. And this is how John was to prepare people for the Lord.

Some might think, well God's not fair. I didn't know I was a sinner? Yet see how Zechariah ends the song;

to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace."

People need to hear about Jesus; that they need to know they need to be saved through the forgiveness of sins because, in God's mercy, He makes forgiveness possible through Jesus.

They need to know God is merciful (vv.78-79)

Each person is born with a broken relationship with God because of sin. We are all ethically and morally imperfect people. Paul says in Eph. 2:4-5

⁴ But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.

God is not fair because He should leave us to pay the consequences of our own sin – eternal separation from Him – and instead in His love initiates reconciliation with Him by sending His Son to die for our sins, and making it possible that through faith alone, by grace alone, people can be saved.

What exactly do people need to be saved from? Let's go to Luke 3 and see another aspect of John's message on how to prepare people for the Lord. Luke points out that John told people about their need for salvation in Jesus because

People are Unaware of God's Future Wrath **(Luke 3)**

The first part of John's message reminds us as we are the John the Baptist's today that in order to help people avoid God's future wrath

They need to believe the Word of God (vv.1-6)

We pick it up half way through v.2

the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the desert. ³ He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁴ As is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

John's message was from God's word. That doesn't mean every word that came out of his mouth was Scripture quotes. However, everything that he shared was rooted in Scripture and included quoting and explaining what God's word says. If we don't acquaint ourselves with God's Word regularly its going to be more difficult to explain salvation and people's need for forgiveness of sin to avoid future judgment. In John 14:26 Jesus told us that it's the Spirit's job to remind us of what Jesus said. But if I'm not putting what Jesus and God said in my head, how can the Spirit remind me of things I haven't 'minded' it yet? We need to point people to God's words not our own.

faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. [Rom. 10:17]

Yet this belief isn't mere intellectual knowledge. John shows us

Their belief must be affirmed through repentance (3:7-14)

The word repent means to do a U-turn; to change from sinful behaviour to godly behaviour. Listen to John in v.7;

⁷ John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ "What should we do then?" the crowd asked.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. Repentance begins with a changed thinking process. The more I think about what I need to do, the greater chance I'll do it, resulting in fruit – visible evidence of a changed life. John gives people some practical application in vv.11-14 of what that looks like for them in that day.

All of which are distinguishable from the typical behaviours of unsaved people. So what am I doing that is uniquely of God? What typical harmful behaviours and speech habits am I seeking to avoid so I am living for God more than myself. In our sharing the gospel we want to help people know that a changed lifestyle should be the result of a genuinely changed heart.

Sharing this with people can seem daunting and overwhelming at times. But let's remember,

We Aren't Expected to Do This in our Own Power

Let's go back to Gabriel's words to Zechariah concerning John in Luke 1:15-17,

¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Preparing people for Jesus by sharing the message of forgiveness of sins is a spiritual work that requires Spirit-ual help. When we accept Christ as our Saviour this same Spirit comes into our

life to enable us to share the gospel and to do the convicting of heart work through the power of God's words. And He will do it through the variety of gifts, abilities and non-abilities that we all have. So

We need to let the Spirit work through us (Luke 1:15-17)

How? Pray that the Spirit would do what God's word says He will do; bring the Word of God to our mind and to convict people of their sin and need for Jesus. Pray for us to speak without fear in Eph. 6:19-20,

¹⁹ Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, ²⁰ for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

Twice he asks people to pray for him to share God truth fearlessly. So Paul was afraid at times to share the gospel? Yup.

Pray to speak with clarity from Col. 4:3-4,

³ And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. ⁴ Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. ⁵ Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Sometimes we over sell it. We keep on talking as if the Spirit needs our help. No, share what you can when you can and let the Spirit take the Word and work in their heart. This is new for many people. They need time to think and process it. If they have questions they will ask. And I think we can see this in John's attitude from John 3:27-30. John's disciples were concerned that more people were following Jesus and being baptized by His disciples. John wisely said in John 3:7,

A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

When we share the gospel let's make sure we

Let Jesus be the focus and not ourselves (John 3:27-30)

Sometimes it is helpful to share our own story of faith. And some of us have spectacular stories where we led a life of sin and selfishness and crime and then at the age of 3 we heard the gospel! If we share our own stories make sure it's to show people what Jesus did for us and continues to do in us. None of us are perfect, we're still becoming more conformed to Jesus every day. We won't do it perfectly. But that's okay. Point them to the Word and what it says about Jesus and give room for the Spirit to work.

While John might not show up in our Nativity sets, his and Jesus' births are connected. From John God reminds us we are partners with Him in preparing the world for Jesus. John is long gone, so are the original disciples and Paul but now the baton is passed to us. We are the ones now preparing the world for Jesus' return. Many are not ready. Many are unaware of their own sinfulness that separates them from God. They are unaware of the consequences of not knowing Jesus. God has chosen you and me to respond to his mercy and grace and through the Spirit to share His

message to a lost world. It's Christmas and many people will look at Jesus, maybe even wish people a Merry Christmas but they really have no clue about why Jesus actually came. We do. Are we going to keep this too ourselves?

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