

GOD SAYS "PROVE IT"

When John the Baptist called out "*turn around*" in the wilderness, it was the backdrop for the pivotal time when God was dramatically fulfilling Old Testament promises, because the promised Christ was coming. As we explore the record of these events in Luke 3, what's it all mean for us today?

1- JOHN'S MESSAGE? John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as he preached, "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!*" Likewise, at the beginning of His earthly ministry, Jesus commanded, "*the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe the gospel.*" All four Gospels begin with this picture of repentance, so let's remind ourselves about these terms. Repent means a change of heart, mind, will. Turning away from sin and toward God.

This turning around is a human action, but it is the result of the Holy Spirit's work. Colin Smith notes, "repentance is fundamental to the gospel. It is the first thing that Jesus Christ says, and if we do not understand this, we will not be able to enter into anything else." The gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior. Forgiveness means removal of the guilt of sin. Forgiveness is a divine action, which God does on the basis of atonement, which is Christ's payment of the penalty for sin.

2- JOHN'S BAPTISM? Baptism is a human action, a ritual washing in water, which pictures the divine spiritual action of God cleansing our sins. Baptism is a response of faith. God says through John, get ready, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, the promised salvation of God is here. In Luke 3:7 John cries out, "*you brood of vipers! who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? The axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*"

Matthew says John addressed this to the religious leaders, who did not repent or be baptized, because they would not admit they needed saving. We need to pay attention to this. Repentance is not mere words, it is deeds. John says, "*bear fruits in keeping with repentance.*" In other words, prove it.

3- WORD & DEED? John declared, "*don't say to yourselves, 'why do I need to repent? We have Abraham as our father' - for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.*" RC Sproul explains, "don't count on your traditions, or birthright, or the fact that you are descendants of Abraham, for this is no guarantee you are ready for the kingdom of God."

John says, prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. The crowds asked, then what shall we do? John's reply applied to their immediate situations: if you have two tunics, or food, share with someone who has none. Tax collectors, don't cheat but collect only what is authorized. Soldiers, don't extort money by threats or false accusations, be content with your wages. These echo Old Testament exhortations to not exalt yourself by exploiting others.

4- WARNING TO YOU? You say you've repented? Then turn, and do righteous deeds to prove it. "Anyone who thinks salvation is forgiveness without change is completely mistaken," warns Colin Smith. "Salvation is much more than forgiveness and a free ticket to heaven. Christ came to make you the person God wants you to be." If you claim to be saved, how have you changed? How has your life been brought into line with God's commandments and character? What a warning to church people!

Those who say, "but I've always believed" sound too much like the religious leaders, Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day. They would not confess their sins and repent, turn away from their sins and turn to Jesus to receive His forgiveness and new life. They thought they didn't need to. But just going through the motions of church doesn't mean you're saved. Jesus said, "*repent and believe.*"

4- JESUS' BAPTISM? Luther notes Jesus calls us to a lifetime of repentance and faith. Not rituals, but life-changing trust in Jesus Christ. JC Ryle says, "no repentance can make atonement for sin, only the blood of Christ, and nothing else. No quantity of repentance can ever justify us in the sight of God. But remember that without repentance no soul was ever yet saved. Repentance forms no part of the price of our redemption, but saved souls are always penitent souls. And saving faith in Christ and true repentance toward God are never found asunder." Baptism doesn't save. Repentance doesn't save. Jesus saves!

John made it clear in verse 16, "*I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" John humbled himself, exalting the Savior. Water baptism pictures Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit in regeneration, to cleanse away sins with the blood of Christ when you are born again. RK Hughes notes, "baptism does not bring forgiveness of sins. John's baptism followed each person's repentance, and was a sign of it. John called people to repent, to turn away from their sins, and their subsequent acceptance of his baptism was indication that they had done so. There was no power in John's baptism." The power is Christ Jesus. He saves, and transforms.

5- YOUR RESPONSE? Jesus says later in Luke, "*I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance*" and "*unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*" and "*repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in My name to all nations.*" It is well said, "people on earth hate to hear the word repent, but those in hell wish they could hear it just once more." Have you turned around, putting all your trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, in repentance and faith? Believe the Good News! ☐