

GOD SAYS "TURN AROUND"

What do you think of when you hear the word "*repent*"? A bearded man with a sign, who passersby avoid, ignore, or stare in disbelief? Repent means "*turn around*" or "do a 180." This vividly brings to mind driving my family in Seattle. I exited the freeway, attempting a left turn. It was the wrong way. A light had just changed. Four lanes of traffic were bearing down. A "Rockford maneuver" saved us in time!

1- GOD SENT A PROPHET! Right before Jesus entered His public ministry, John the Baptist got the attention of the people, telling them to "*turn around.*" This was during the great turning point in the history of the world and the redemption of God's people. Luke 3 says "*the Word of God came to John*" the son of Zechariah, in the wilderness. This phrasing echoes Isaiah 39:4 and Jeremiah 1:1-4.

These words identify John as a prophet. Luke 1:15-17 prophesies "*he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from his mother's womb.*" Not only that, but "*he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.*"

This was the incredible angelical announcement given to Zechariah about John, echoing Isaiah 40 and Malachi 3:1 and 4:5-6. At John's birth, Zechariah prophesied incredible things, full of Old Testament allusions about God's promised Christ the Messiah, and His messenger. He said "*the child will be called the prophet of the Most High, and will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people, in the forgiveness of their sins.*" John was this promised prophet!

2- AT THE RIGHT TIME! Luke the physician is a careful historian. He places this record in a historical period of degenerate and dark political and priestly intrigue. It was the 15th year of Tiberias reigning over the Roman Empire, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea. He replaced Herod Archelaus, who with his brothers had inherited the regions ruled by Herod the Great, who died just after Jesus was born.

And it was when Caiaphas was appointed High Priest in place of Annas, his father-in-law who still ran things. This historical setting was about 28AD, or 33 years after the birth of John, the cousin of Jesus. Luke 3:3-6 recounts how John "*went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'*"

3- PREPARE YOUR HEARTS! Jews practiced various baptisms, religious rituals that immersed people in water, such as baptizing converted Gentiles. But John was calling Jews to repentance. Amazingly, great crowds came to the wilderness to hear him and to be baptized. RC Sproul notes, "this was both unique and scandalous to the nation of Israel, because a new era was about to start.

"The paths of Israel had become crooked, the religious leaders corrupt. Messiah was ready to come but the people were not ready. They were unclean," Sproul continues, "If they want to meet Messiah they have to first be cleansed." The picture of baptism is remarkable because of the personal commitment and public nature of it all. Sproul says it was the great spiritual awakening that God had promised would take place. He prepares the people's hearts to receive Him.

4- JOHN'S MESSAGE? Matthew 11 notes people came to hear John the prophet, speaking the word of God. Jesus said there was no one greater than John the Baptist. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets, the "Elijah" who was to come, as prophesied hundreds of years before. Just as the angel announced in Luke 1, John was filled with the Holy Spirit from the womb, and came in the spirit and power of Elijah. In Matthew 3:2 he preached "*repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*"

John is the greatest and last of the Old Testament prophets, who came at the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. And Jesus the Christ came to be crucified and resurrected, as the mediator of the New Covenant. Sproul observes, "the New Testament as a period of history did not begin until Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant and fulfilled the Old Covenant. Like the other prophets, John spoke to foretell the coming of Messiah. But unlike them, He was the herald of the King Himself, the forerunner, uniquely endowed by God to usher in the age of the Messiah."

5- HOW WILL YOU RESPOND? RK Hughes says "John's ministry was entirely due to the work of the Holy Spirit, as he preached in the Spirit's power to God's covenant people. The Holy Spirit convicted them, and gave them the grace to believe John's message and repent. Baptism was a sign of the Spirit-given grace of repentance." People responded to this message, through an attention-getting wilderness man who wore camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey.

Mark and Matthew report that people from all over Judea and Jerusalem came out to him, being baptized in the Jordan river, confessing their sins. Confession and repentance are two sides of the same coin, acknowledging sin and turning away from it. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, convicting and convincing of sin, leading to forgiveness. They believed God's savior, the Christ, was at hand! □