

*The road into the farm that I grew up on, followed the boundary fence for about 5km. And because the boundary wasn't a straight line, that meant the road had to take 2\* 90degree bends.*

*One day the council engineer came to see Dad, and said we want to straighten that road up a bit. And so they chopped a corner off of our farm and gave it to the neighbour, and chopped a corner off the neighbour's farm and gave it to us.*

*But a fair bit of work had to be put into it. It was melon-hole country, so it had to be levelled, it had to be fenced, the road had to be:*

- *surveyed;*
- *straightened*
- *formed up;*
- *graded & rolled;*
- *gravelled & rolled again...*

*It's a big job to build a road.*

The ministry of John the Baptist, was spiritual road-building – it was preparing the road for the one who is greater than him, who would come after him.

Isaiah had said:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness:

'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> 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,  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' "

It's an image of making a road, for the approach of the coming king.

And the highway that clears the way for God's coming, is a purified heart... Jesus said, "

Matthew 5:8 (ESV)

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

If you're anything like me, you would be well aware that a fair bit of straightening up and levelling up needs to be done, to make us pure in heart.

And for Israel itself, things really **needed** to be straightened out and levelled up. Today's reading reveals is a very complex political situation in Israel, and a very strained religious situation.

Politically, Israel (like many other nations at that time) were subject to Roman occupation and rule. And Luke lists these rulers, in order of their level of oversight:

- He starts out with the Roman Emperor – in the 15<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar.  
(around 29AD)
- Pontius Pilate was the Roman Governor of Judea

But the practice of the Romans, when they conquered a land, was to set up a local puppet-king – a local who would have some level of ruling responsibility, but there was no doubt – they were beholden to Rome.

And so there were a bunch of “Tetrarchs” who were called Kings, and they were set up over various regions. (the one we’re most familiar with is King Herod)

But when it came to the Jewish religion, there can only be one high priest. But Luke says “the high priest” (singular) was Annas **and** Caiaphas. (2 blokes) You see, what happened<sup>i</sup> is “Annas” was the High Priest, but in 15AD (14 years earlier), the Roman Governor at the time (Gratus) didn’t like Annas, and stood him down. And over the next few years, there were 5 different High Priests, until they finally settled on Caiaphas...

And so Caiaphas was recognised as the High Priest by Rome, but it seems that the real High Priest – the one who had the influence behind the scenes – the one whom the people still recognised as the High Priest, was Annas...

And so Israel was in disarray. Too many kings, that weren’t real kings; Too many High Priests that weren’t real high priests.

**This** was God’s perfect timing for His Messiah to come: Jesus Christ would come. He came as the long-awaited King of Israel, and He came as the new High Priest – the **only** intermediary between God and man.

But to prepare for the coming of this King, the ground had to be prepared. And the highway that clears the way for God’s coming, is a purified heart.

And so the **word of God** came to John. It wasn’t John’s own idea – it was the word of God, that sent him out to proclaim a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

**Baptism**, was affirming a commitment to a completely new relationship with God – repentance that prepared one, to receive Jesus.

You see, John was very clear – it wasn’t about him. John wasn’t the messiah. He was merely someone preparing the way for the one who was far mightier – much stronger (not worthy to untie His sandals).

Righto, so the message of John the Baptist, was one of:

- Preparing;
  - receiving;
  - avoiding...
- 
- Preparing for the coming King;
  - Receiving forgiveness
  - avoiding judgment

And **all** of this message, is categorised as “good news”.

So, what did John preach? Well, obviously Luke doesn't record everything that John preached, but we are given a few snippets. John's place of ministry, was out in the wilderness. He didn't go to the crowds – the crowds came to him.

And when the crowds came to John, he gave them a real seeker-friendly welcome didn't he...

**"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"**

Imagine if we greeted new-comers at the door like that. I'm not sure they'd come again.

He referred to them as the offspring of snakes. Now Biblically, a snake represents being opposed to God. And these crowds (as religious as they were), came from a long line of people who were supposed to belong to God, but were opposed to God.

*Now, when you see a snake near the house, the only good snake's a dead one. We don't want a snake getting thee dogs or the chooks or the kids. And it slithers away and hides in the grass, and what do we do? We light a match and throw it in the grass, and as the fire gets going, out comes the snake, fleeing the fire.*

And this is the image that John's giving here – "You children of snakes/devil – how did you know to flee from the coming fire???" How did you know to flee from God's judgment???

You see, John was indicating two different comings of Jesus. In Jesus' first coming, He came as “Saviour”. At His 2<sup>nd</sup> coming, He will come as judge. That’s what he was talking about, when he said **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**

But we’re getting a bit ahead of ourselves – we’ll come back to that shortly.

When the people came to be baptised, they came as a people opposed to God, and as a people destined to be subject to a judgment of fire.

And the message of John the Baptist, is the same as the message that we preach today “**Repent!!**”. The Greek word is μετανοία (metanoia) and a classical Greek dictionary meaning means “a change of mind”. **But Biblically**, the way “repentance” is used, is it’s a “conversion” or a “turning”. To repent, is to turn away from evil, and to turn toward God. And it’s a **complete** turning of the **complete** man/woman. It’s a turning of heart, soul and mind and it’s a turning of our actions, away from evil, and toward God.

There is a horrible heresy being preached in this world today – it’s an anaemic gospel, that relies on the classical dictionary meaning (change of mind). It’s the teaching that says, “All you have to do is change your mind about who Jesus is. Believe in Jesus, and believe that he is the Son of God, and you are saved... And that’s it – that’s the modern version of repentance...”

The problem is, it bears no resemblance to the Biblical model of repentance.

Repentance is thoroughly practical – it’s an about-face – a U-turn – turning around of the whole person – it’s a conversion to a whole new way of life. And as I have said so often, it is something that is so radical, that Jesus described it as “being born again”...

There once was a time, that a person’s race or heritage was thought to be the key to salvation. And so, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob – the promise was to them, right???

Wrong!!! And John set them straight: Don’t start saying to yourself “We’ve got Abraham as our father”... We’re all very important – Look at our Godly heritage... Don’t count on that. God could raise up from these stones, children of Abraham...

**Repentance** is what’s required. You see, repentance is turning away from evil/godlessness, and turning toward God and His righteousness. That is how we prepare for the coming of Jesus. In V<sup>8</sup> **Bear fruits in keeping with repentance.**

You see, when we repent and turn toward God, everything changes. Our life cannot remain the same. The things we value – the things we do, will be radically transformed. And if you haven’t been radically transformed, I have to ask you, “Have you repented?”

In V9, we find another image of judgment, and it's judgment for those who are **not** transformed. It's like God has a big axe, ready to cut down any tree that is not fruitful. **Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

That, is a message of judgment, that I believe the Western Christian church needs to hear again today. I believe our God is tired of when we are Christian in the mind and Christian in what we say, but godless in what we do.

Repent!

Now, to those who heard the message of John the Baptist, they were left in no doubt, that repentance is expressed with activity. They said "**What then shall we do?**"

And John the Baptist, did he then say, "No, don't do anything – If you try to do good at this point, you're not living by grace." Is that what John said? It's what some preachers will tell you...

He told them to bear fruit (plural) in keeping with repentance. What does that look like? Well, it's very practical.

If you see someone who doesn't have a single shirt to wear or a single pair of pants to wear, and you've got 2 shirts or 2 pairs of pants, give them one. And if you discover that a



person doesn't have any food at all, you share your food with them.

Alright, he's talking about the most basic human needs – a repentant person – a person who turns their heart toward God, will demonstrate this by sharing from their excess that others may have the most basic human needs.

And the Tax collectors came to be baptised: **"Teacher, what shall we do?"**

Now, let me tell you about Tax collectors. They were hated, and with good reason. The Romans used the locals to collect their taxes for them. *Now, I don't think I've ever met anyone who likes paying tax.* But imagine if we were paying tax to a foreign government, and imagine that our taxes were paying the wages of the soldiers, who were oppressing us...

Nobody wanted to do that job, and so Tax collectors were paid very well, and they were able to force people to pay more tax than what was due, and they would keep that for themselves.

Now, of course the locals hated them – they were seen as collaborators... And so when the Tax collectors came to repent and be baptised, and asked "What shall we do?", I'm pretty sure everyone would've expected John to say, "Stop collecting taxes – stop collaborating with the enemy" – is that what he said? No. He simply said, **"Collect no more than you are authorized to do."**

Don't cheat the system. Don't steal from those you're collecting from.

**14 Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?”**

Now, we don't know if these soldiers were Roman Centurions or if they were local soldiers equivalent to police, but regardless, they were ultimately law-&-order working on behalf of their oppressors Rome. Did John say, “Stop working for the tyrant who rules us”? No. He said, don't use your authority and power to extort money from anyone **and be content with your wages.**

Basically, the examples of repentance John gave, could be summarised with the commandment that Jesus would later give, to Love God, and to love your neighbour as yourself...

- sharing what we have with those who are genuinely in need of the most basic things; and
- dealing honestly and fairly with everyone – putting others first.

That's what repentance looks like. Are you getting the picture?

Righto:

It was obvious the teaching of John had the fingerprints of God all over it... And so they started wondering, “Is this bloke the Messiah”? No. **“I baptise you with water, but**

he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The coming of Jesus, causes a great division. There's a great separation between those who are saved to eternal life, and those who are judged to fire that cannot be put out.

The image that he gives, is that of a threshing floor. *Today we use headers, or the Yanks like to call it a "combine harvester". And basically a header is a threshing floor on wheels.*

The wheat gets picked, but then it has to be threshed and winnowed. Threshing is rubbing or beating the grain out of the head. But then you're left with straw and chaff and wheat all mixed together. The straw can be picked up and shaken and put aside for animal feed (hay). But that still leaves the wheat and chaff. To separate wheat from chaff, it has to be winnowed. You either do it on a breezy day, or you set up a fan to produce the wind. And they'd use a thing called a winnowing fork. And they'd scoop up the chaff & wheat & throw it up into the breeze. And the light chaff would blow off over to the side and land in the dirt, and the heavy grain would drop straight down.

The wheat would be gathered into the barn, but what do you do with the big mound of chaff that's blown into a big heap over to the side? They'd just burn it. And dry chaff, there's no putting that fire out.

And that's the image that John gives – **this** is the image of salvation and judgment when Jesus comes. The wheat, He gathers into His barn – the chaff, he burns up with a fire that cannot be put out.

Who are the wheat? Well it sorta goes without explanation. The wheat are those who have prepared for the coming judgment by welcoming Jesus into their hearts, through the road of repentance. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Those who are judged, are those who don't welcome Jesus into their hearts, and who don't demonstrate their turning to God by practical Godly living.

It's as simple as that.

How do we respond to that? You know, when most of us hear about judgment, we think, "Well, that's not good news"... But **absolutely** it's good news. The Good news is that those who turn their hearts toward God, have eternal life – the Day of Judgment has come, and they've fled from the coming wrath – saved by the blood of Jesus – they're like the good wheat gathered into the barn.

But at the same time, it is Good news, that admission to the kingdom of God, is reserved for the genuine. If we are not genuine in our faith and fruitful in Godly living, we've chosen a different kingdom.

How do we respond to this? We repent, for the forgiveness of sins.

*A new pastor preached his first sermon at his new church. He preached a wonderful sermon “Repent, repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” Everyone loved the sermon. Some said it was the best sermon they’d ever heard.*

*On the second Sunday, he preached exactly the same sermon. “Repent, repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” It didn’t really matter much, because most of the congregation couldn’t remember what they’d heard the previous week.*

*On the third Sunday, he preached the same sermon again. “Repent, repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” This time the folk thought “We’ve heard this before.”*

*On the fourth Sunday, “Repent, repent. The Kingdom of God is at hand.” And the church council pulled him aside and asked for an explanation.*

*His answer:*

- *Yes, he was able to preach other sermons.*
- *Yes, he did have other sermons.*
- *Yes, he did want to preach other sermons.*

*The problem? He would preach another sermon as soon as the congregation repented.*

Our relationship with God doesn’t begin without repentance.

In the Gospel of Luke, the message of “repentance for the forgiveness of sins”, brackets the entire ministry of Jesus. It

begins with John the Baptist preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And at the very end of the Gospel of Luke, just before Jesus ascends into heaven, he tells his disciples, what their job is to do:

**Luke 24:47 (ESV)**

**47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.**

Repentance, for the forgiveness of sins. Without repentance, there is no genuine turning toward God, and so without repentance, there is no forgiveness.

Many heard the message of John, and responded. Some prepared a level road for Jesus in their heart.

Others were like King Herod. He hated John. Why? Because he had taken his brother's wife as his own. And John had been quite scathing "You must not do that. Repent"... But rather than listen to the word of God, King Herod had John locked up, and eventually executed.

And many people today, are just like King Herod. They want to put the message of repentance out of sight, out of mind, locked in a dungeon... ("We don't want to hear about repentance from sin; We don't want to hear about judgment.") We only want to hear about blessings...

But this is what we proclaim: **repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name [Jesus] to all nations**

and it must begin here...

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,  
we thank You that you sent Your Son,  
that we might have forgiveness in His Name.

We recognise,  
the message of John the Baptist  
and the message of Jesus, are one and the same.  
Repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Lord,  
we turn away from godlessness,  
we flee from evil,  
we flee from the coming wrath...  
and we turn our hearts towards You.

Help us to bear good fruit.  
Show us the areas of our life,  
that must be pruned away,  
And help us to bear fruit of the Spirit,

To Your Glory,  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Annas* was high priest AD 6–15, when the Roman governor Gratus deposed him. Five of his sons became high priest in due course, and *Caiaphas*, who held the office AD 18–36, was his son-in-law. Luke uses the singular, which shows that he knew there was only one high priest. He appears to mean that Caiaphas was actually in office, but that Annas still exercised great influence, perhaps even was regarded by many Jews as the true high priest (cf. Acts 4:6; Marshall notes Schürmann’s translation ‘Annas the high priest and Caiaphas’). It may be worth pointing out that when Jesus was arrested he was first brought to Annas (John 18:13). Morris, L. (1988) *Luke: an introduction and commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries).