

Pointing us to Jesus

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Preacher: Neil MacMillan

[0 : 00] We have a Bible reader now, so I'm going to hand back to Joan. She's going to read to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 3, verses 15 to 23.

The people were waiting expectantly, and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, I baptise you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

And with many other words, John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them. But when John rebuked Herod, the Tetrarch, because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife, and all the other evil things he had done, Herod added this to them all. He locked John up in prison.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.

[1 : 22] And a voice came from heaven. You are my son, whom I love. With you I am well pleased. Now Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began his ministry.

Thank you, Joe. So here we are back in the Gospel of Luke and taking some time this morning to think about chapter three.

So try and sort of picture for yourself a cafe, a Mediterranean cafe. Beside the sea is a warm evening.

The moonlight is hitting the waters. And Luke, who wrote this Gospel, is sitting in the cafe sharing a nice glass of Italian wine with a friend of his called Theophilus.

And they've just been at church together. They were at a house church meeting in somebody's home. And the mood in the meeting was really depressing and pretty gloomy.

[2 : 28] It was one of those church meetings that just left people feeling really flat. People were anxious. Some of them were losing their jobs because of their Christian faith. There was a lot of persecution going on across the city with arrests and news coming from Rome of persecution against the church there.

And Theophilus and Luke are just sitting in a cafe pondering how do things turn out like this? And why is it so hard to be a Christian?

Theophilus is a man of stature, a man of social standing, a Gentile, wealthy, well-educated. And he's starting to really question if he did the right thing in becoming a Christian.

He's wondering if he's backed the wrong horse. And so he's chatting away to Luke, who's also a well-educated man, a doctor, a historian, a writer.

And he's saying to Luke, you know, is there really any place for the Christian faith in our culture and our society? Are our beliefs not so out of sync with everyone else's that really we can only expect the church to wither and die?

[3 : 43] It's not going to thrive in this kind of culture. Why is everyone so hostile to the gospel? And if I've chosen the Christian way, if I've chosen to be a follower of Jesus, was I actually the wrong choice?

I'm having a lot of doubts, Luke, and I'm just not really sure about being a Christian anymore. And Luke says these are real questions.

I've got the same questions. And those were real questions in the first century when this gospel was written, probably sometime between about 65 and 85 AD.

And they're real questions right now, aren't they, for lots of people. What place does Christianity have in the modern world? What is the point of being a Christian in a culture where people are so hostile to what we believe?

Why is it so hard being a Christian? Why don't I feel better about myself? Why do I get depressed or lonely or sad? Is Jesus not supposed to make me happy all the time? Why do I have chosen the wrong path?

[4 : 51] Taken a wrong turn when I decided to become a follower of Jesus. And Luke went away. And what he did is he sat down and he pondered the questions that Theophilus had given to him.

And at the beginning of this gospel in chapter one, he says, Theophilus, I've gone away and I've done a lot of research. I've written it all down. And I just want you to be able to see that what you believe is good.

It's reliable. It's true. And that to follow Jesus is a great thing. And actually, don't be surprised that it's a hard thing as well, because that's what Jesus promised.

That's what his early disciples experienced. The fact that there's a lot of hostility to the world, in the world to Christianity. Well, that's always been the way and it always will be the way in the setting that we live in.

So that's kind of where Luke is coming from. Him and Theophilus chewing over the validity of the Christian faith and their culture and the power of the Christian faith for their own lives.

[5 : 59] And Luke keeps wanting to point us towards Jesus. And I'm going to say he's pointing us towards Jesus as the one who has come to us from God to bring us to God.

Those of us who are longing for something spiritually, who are seeking spiritually, what we seek is to be found in Jesus. That's what Luke's saying. And from the passage that Joe read to us today and from Luke chapter 3, I want to say that, first of all, the facts point us towards Jesus.

OK, the facts point us towards Jesus. Secondly, I want to say to us that John the Baptist is pointing us towards Jesus. And finally, that the Father, God the Father in heaven, points us towards Jesus.

Everything is pointing towards Jesus as the saviour that we are to trust and follow. Take up your cross, deny yourself and follow him.

Is the gospel call for me and for you today as it was for Theophilus and Luke all that time ago. So the facts point us to Jesus.

[7 : 12] Now, Luke chapter 3 is a really interesting chapter. It begins with a list of facts. We didn't read them, but I'll read them for you. Or you can switch to Luke 3 in your smartphone.

Or you can pick up your Bible if you've got one there beside you. This is the way Luke chapter 3 starts. So the facts point to Jesus.

Now, what do I mean by this? What am I getting at? Well, often in sort of discussions about religion and Christianity and our cultural setting, people put facts against faith, don't they?

They say, you know, I have facts. But if you're a Christian, you're kind of ignoring the facts and you're relying on faith.

Christians have been described as being like children who are afraid of the dark. And so they want to make imaginary friends. One person put it this way.

[8 : 37] So I'm just going to read you a quote from somebody called Greg Kukul on a website called Be Thinking. So this is what he says. Faith is what you use when all reason is against you.

It's religious wishful thinking in which one squeezes out spiritual hope by intense acts of sheer will. People of faith believe the impossible.

People of faith believe that which is contrary to fact. People of faith believe that which is contrary to evidence. So that's sort of the way that sometimes that's sketched out for us, isn't it?

That there's facts about the world we live in. And then there's faith, which is an escape from the facts into some kind of imaginary world, some other reality.

But is this an imaginary world that Luke is describing for us? Because as I read to you from the very beginning of Luke's Gospel, what's he doing? Or sorry, from Luke 3.

[9 : 39] What's he doing at the beginning of Luke 3? He's setting out facts. Fact. Tiberius Caesar was indeed emperor. It's the 15th year.

We know who the emperor is. We know it's the 15th year of his year, which is about AD 28, 29. And all the other facts fit as well, don't they?

Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Licinius, Annas, Caiaphas. These are all real people located in the right places doing jobs that really existed, that they actually did.

So we know that from scripture, but we also know it from a lot of extra biblical sources as well. So Luke lists lots of facts at the beginning of this chapter.

And I'm going to hand back to Joe for a minute. Joe, I hope you're paying attention here because the end of Luke's Gospel is a lengthy genealogy. So just to get a feel for that, I've asked Joe to read it to us.

[10 : 41] Now, Jesus himself was about 30 years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought of Joseph, the son of Heli, the son of Matthat, the son of Levi, the son of Melchi, the son of Jani, the son of Joseph, the son of Metathias, the son of Amos, the son of Nahum, the son of Esli, the son of Nagai, the son of Meath, the son of Matathias, the son of Samian, the son of Josach, the son of Jodah, the son of Jonan, the son of Risa, the son of Zerubbel, the son of Siaotiel, the son of Nerai, the son of Melchi, the son of Adai, the son of Kossam, the son of Elmadam, the son of Er, the son of Doshua, the son of Eliezer, the son of Jordan, the son of Mathat, the son of Levi, the son of Simeon, the son of Judah, the son of Joseph, the son of Jonam, the son of Eliakim, the son of Malia the son of manna the son of Mattaca the son of Nathan the son of

David the son of Jesse the son of Obed the son of Boaz the son of Simon the son of nation the son of a Benadab the son of Ram the son of Hedron the son of Perez, the son of Judah, the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham, the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Serug, the son of Ruh, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, the son of Canaan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lammeth, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Canaan, the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.

So thanks, Joe, that was a great job. I hope you all got just a feel for that, that rhythm that Joe's reading there of one generation after another generation. Who are they? They these are the antecedents of Jesus. These are his ancestors. So the end of Luke 3 is a genealogy that tells us about the facts of his ancestry. It's an amazing thing, isn't it? He's 30 years old, Jesus. Fact. He's connected back through his ancestry. Who? To King David.

Well, we know from the Old Testament scriptures that the Messiah was to be a descendant of King David. He links us back to Abraham. We know that the promise to Abraham was that from his seed, the Savior would come. And so the facts are being put in place that here is Jesus descended all the way back from Adam, related to all humanity and a Savior for all humanity. His life and his lineage are real and they are documented. So the facts are pointing us towards Jesus. He is who God promised.

He's real. He's historical. He's not a figment of imagination. So if you think about what Luke's doing here, it's a documentary, it's an investigation of who Jesus really is, and that's very different from imaginary literature or fantasy literature. What we have are facts, facts, facts, facts, and more facts.

[14 : 41] I'm not a huge fan of Lord of the Rings, but you know, this is not Mordor or the Shire or the Five Armies or Golem or Hobbits or Elves. You know, imaginary worlds are well loved and enjoyed by lots of people.

But this is not an escape into an imaginary world. It's looking at facts, seeing in those facts information about who Jesus is and why he came to the world. And instead of saying, well, you've got facts versus faith, which is how some people want to frame that for us. Actually, as we look at the facts, what they do is they produce faith. We see that Jesus comes in fulfillment of the promises of God.

We see Jesus coming in a particular historical setting at a particular time in history. We see the life and works and words of Jesus attested to by eyewitnesses and then recorded for us by careful and accurate historians like Luke. And those facts, as they are all brought together by great writers like Luke, what do they do? They give us confidence that we can have faith in Jesus as the Savior.

So the facts point us towards Jesus. The second thing I want to say, though, is that John the Baptist points us towards Jesus. Now, John the Baptist came with a bang, didn't he? With a great oomph, with pizzazz, not quite in a sort of glamorous way, but in a dramatic way into the desert around Jordan and people flocked out to see him because his ministry was remarkable and powerful.

And people were longing to hear from God. They were longing to see Israel restored and the worship of the temple brought back and God's word honoured and loved. And so people had all these expectations.

[16 : 40] And here comes John. And he comes with such power, with such clarity. And people start to think, Joe read it for us in the first reading. People started to wonder, it says in verse 15, is John the Baptist the Christ? Is he the Messiah? So what does John say? Well, what John says is, it ain't me, babe. I'm not the one you're looking for. There's one coming who's so much greater than I am.

There's a song that Johnny Cash, I was talking about Johnny Cash recently, and here he's back again. He had a song, It Ain't Me, Babe, about how people can look to us with a false sense of expectation.

So It Ain't Me, Babe says, you say you're looking for someone who's never weak, but always strong, to protect you and defend you, whether you're right or wrong. Someone to open each and every door.

But it ain't me, babe. No, no, no. It ain't me, babe. It ain't me. You're looking for, babe. The song goes on saying, you're looking for somebody who will live and die for you.

Johnny Cash recognising that song. We're all looking for a saviour of some sort, a rescuer, someone to make our life feel good. That might be ourselves. It might be our family, our spouse. It might be someone that we want to be with and we've fallen in love with and we long for a relationship with. Or it might be, I don't know, all kinds of different things that we put our hope and our trust in. And Johnny Cash says, well, actually, none of us are saviours like that.

[18 : 25] We don't have that power in each other's life. And that's what John the Baptist was saying, wasn't it? He's saying, it's not me. I'm not the one you're looking for.

I'm nothing compared to Jesus. If you were to just look at your Bible again, rabbis, Jewish rabbis of the first century were told, you know, they used to sort of gather followers and disciples just as Jesus did and then school them in their ways of Judaism.

And rabbis were told, you know, when you gather your disciples, never ask them to undo the laces on your sandals or the fittings on your sandals, because that's such a menial, dirty, filthy task. Never make your disciples unlace your sandals.

Well, John flips that in his head and he says, I'm not even fit to unlace the sandals of Jesus. He is so much greater than I am, so much more important. Why? Because as we saw last week, earlier, you might not have been listening to what we said last week, but earlier in this chapter of John, of Luke's gospel, John, there's a quote that describes John and his role that comes from Isaiah chapter 40. It says this, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.

So Isaiah 40 describes John the Baptist's role in preparing the way for the Messiah. Now that word Lord is in Hebrew, in the Old Testament, Isaiah, the word Yahweh, the word for God. John is saying, I'm here to prepare the way for the coming of God, of Yahweh, of Jehovah among you. I am utterly unworthy. I do not compare to him in any way at all. Compared with every prophet who's ever lived, Jesus is in another stratosphere. John's out in the desert bringing a little bit of color, a little bit of life. He's like a flower blooming in the desert. But then comes Jesus, and what does he bring? He brings a whole oasis, living waters in the desert, a garden, a paradise garden where we can rest and be restored to our true humanity. Jesus offers life in abundance, even in the wilderness. Something that John couldn't do, no prophet can do, no person can do. Jesus offers this because he is God. And John says there are three very clear ways that Jesus is better than I am.

[21 : 07] First of all, he's stronger than me. So in Luke chapter 3, John says about Jesus in verse 16, I baptize you with water, but one more powerful than I will come. The thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie, he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and fire. One more powerful, one stronger than me is coming. The strong one is coming. Jesus has a power to help us that is divine and supernatural and that no person can ever match. He is strong enough to defeat all our enemies.

And then John is saying, my baptism, it's not really up to much. You need his baptism, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, because those who have the Holy Spirit will live in the presence of God forever. I can't do that for you, says John, but Jesus can. And he will baptize with fire.

The winnowing fork is in his hand, we're told, separating grain from chaff, separating people from those who have faith in God and love God and those who refuse to have God in their lives.

Jesus, John says, is the judge. He's greater than me because why? He's stronger. He can defeat all our enemies. Two, because he baptizes with the Holy Spirit, bringing you to live in the presence of God forever. And three, because he is the judge of all the earth. The idea that Jesus is our judge is such an important one. It puts us all on the same footing as human beings. We all stand before God as judge.

And as we think about that, we know that there is nothing that we can do to make our lives right. So we don't become overwhelmed with anxiety by that thought. But rather, we look and say, well, God has sent the one who will judge us to save us. And on the day of judgment, he'll be our advocate. The one who says, yes, they're a sinner, but their sins are all forgiven. They have been made righteous in me.

[23 : 18] So let's remember that, that John the Baptist is pointing us to Jesus. He's saying, it ain't me, babe. You know, we can look at the church today as, as Theophilism looked and look, looked at the church in the first century and thought, the church has lots of problems. It's struggling. And the church has lots of flaws. We can see that it's pretty obvious. And that can make us disillusioned or fearful or cynical about Christianity. You know, last week I saw people carrying signs that says, Jesus saves, Jesus saves, involved in violence, invading the Capitol building in Washington, DC.

You look at that and you think, what has that got to do with Christianity? And the answer is nothing. It ain't them, babe. We're not looking at these people for hope or for a pointer. We're looking towards Jesus. Christians can't save you. John the Baptist can't save you. The church can't save you.

Jesus does. All power is his. And it's Jesus that makes being a Christian worthwhile. Through the hard times and the good times, through the depression and the sorrow and the joy and the happiness, through all those different seasons of life, it's Jesus that makes being a Christian worthwhile. And so Jesus wants to point us to Jesus and says, fix your eyes on him.

Look to him. See who he is. And that's what the father does, isn't it? The father points us towards Jesus as well. He speaks from heaven and he says, this is my son.

Whom I love with him. I'm well pleased. So there you go. Verse 22 says this, the Holy Spirit descended in Jesus and bodily form like a dove. A voice came from heaven saying, you are my son whom I love with you. I am well pleased. Now, if Luke was making a documentary or a film, this would be the moment when the camera really swings to Jesus and zooms in on him. Up to this point, you know, the camera has been in John the Baptist quite a lot of the time.

[25 : 44] And looking at John the Baptist and focused on him. But what we're finding out is actually John the Baptist is, he's not the main character. He's just an introductory character. Now the focus is going to shift to Jesus. A door closes in John, literally a prison door. We read that.

And that Herod imprisoned him for criticizing Herod's marriage to Herodias, his sister-in-law. Both of them divorced and then remarried to each other in contravention of all that the Old Testament taught. And John stood out and gave vocal criticism to this.

Having biblical morality and a biblical view of life and marriage isn't an easy thing to hold to in many cultures, including our own. And Luke and Theophilus will feel that pressure and we'll feel that pressure. And John the Baptist felt that pressure. So Theophilus has been shown, yeah, being a Christian, even for John the Baptist, it meant a lot of suffering.

But look at Jesus. He's worth it. The Father zooms in on him, the focus from heaven. There's this revelation going on, a curtain being peeled back. And here the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove in a movement that resembles the movement of a dove. And the voice speaks saying, you are my son, whom I love with you. I am well pleased. As the Spirit comes on Jesus, he has been enabled and empowered for his earthly ministry. He's taken our human nature. And in that human nature, it is the Spirit that enables him and empowers him to serve God. And along with that comes this endorsement from heaven. You wonder who this is. You're wondering about Jesus.

Here he is. You are my son, whom I love with you. I'm well pleased. So there's this great idea of the beloved son. The son in whom God's love rests so much. The royal son of God. This goes back into the Psalms. This is my son, God says. He declares him king over all things. And so this kingly son is introduced to us again. John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for the son. And we were told that as the son of God comes, as the Lord comes among us, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in. Every mountain and hill made low. Crooked roads will become straight and rough way smooth.

[28 : 37] We have to get ready for the coming of Jesus. This is the royal son. And the focus of our lives needs to be able to move away from ourselves and our own plans and our own egos and to focus on Jesus.

To say, my life now is not about me and the shape that I want to give my world. But it's the shape that the world must take as Christ comes. I raise down the mountains. I fill in the valleys. I straighten out what's crooked. The topography of my life changes as Jesus comes.

My ambitions, my desires, my plans are all changed by Jesus because life is no longer about what I want, but about what Jesus is doing. Now, that doesn't mean that I'm going to get everything that I want, does it? You know, Jesus is not deliveroo. You dial up and you get delivered instantly. The life that you always wanted, the happiness that you were expecting, the career advancement that you long for, the recognition and esteem of people that you crave. Or the relationships that you want or the peace of mind that you want. That doesn't always get delivered to you on demand by Jesus. Jesus comes and humbles us and challenges us. He leads us in different ways from those that we expect. His plan for our lives, his purposes for our lives are so utterly contrary often to what we expect. And that takes a lot of trust, doesn't it? I think that's what Theophilus was finding hard. It takes a lot of trust to follow

Jesus. When the days are dark, when your spirits are low and when things seem so much against you and you think, why did I do this? Why did I become a Christian? Why did I go this path?

It's not what I wanted and it's not what I expected. And look at saying, well, the Lord has come and turned our lives in their head. He brings the valleys, the mountains down and he fills the valleys and he changes the shape, the geography and the topography of our lives. He rewrites the script for us. And I want to say to you then, pick up your Bible, because that's where we see the shape that life should have.

[31 : 16] And often our struggle is that when things are hard, we close the Bible, we've put it aside and we stop listening to what God is saying to us about the world we live in and our place in that world and in his story. And we lose the perspective of scripture, the comfort of scripture and the hope of scripture.

And we come further and further and our doubts grow deeper and deeper. This is a living word that brings promise, that brings hope, that brings comfort. As you're into a new year, I want to say, get daily Bible reading notes like the Explore notes or Daily Bread or a Bible reading plan or a book of daily readings like My Rock, My Refuge from Tim Keller. You can find it on Amazon really easily.

But these things just keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. And you need to keep your eyes fixed on Jesus because often if you're just fixed on what you want and hope for for yourself, then that's a really, really frustrating way to be. So fix your eyes on Jesus because he's the royal son. He's the ruler of all things and he has come to reorder our lives for his kingdom and for his glory. And that is hard sometimes, but he is the beloved son. And so I want to say this, there is an awful lot of love in Jesus.

There is an awful lot of love for us, for me, for you in Jesus. There's a world of love in him.

All the love you ever wanted and more is in Jesus. This is my son whom I love. You're my son whom I love, God says to him. So God affirms him. God reassures him. I love you and I am pleased with you. I delight in you.

[33 : 19] And through Jesus, God expresses the same love to us. There's no love greater or more perfect than the love that the father has for the son. And then Jesus comes and says, as the father has loved me, so have I loved you. And through Jesus, we become the beloved of God as well.

And so although the way may feel very hard, I want to say, keep your eyes fixed in Jesus. The father is pointing you towards Jesus. Why? Because in Jesus, you will find God's love for you.

As you see Jesus laying down his life on the cross for the brokenness, the mess, the meanness, the superficiality, the triviality of your life, of all the sin that you've embraced, of the way that you've treated God so poorly. And often sometimes we treat God with such contempt and we just sweep aside who God is and what he asks of us. And we barely pay him any attention at all.

And we trample all the good that he's done for us and given to us under our feet. And in that, God comes and says, I love you. I love you. And I have not forgotten you and I will never forget you.

And nothing in heaven or earth can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. There's love for you. The father points you to Jesus. John the Baptist points you to Jesus.

[35 : 00] The facts point you to Jesus. The facts of scripture and the facts of history. Everything is pointing you to Jesus. I'm pointing myself to Jesus today and I'm pointing you to Jesus today and saying he's the one, isn't he?

He is the one. He's our hope. He's our life. He's our love. He's the one who is everything. And so make your life and everything about your life about Jesus.

Put your hope, your faith and your trust in him today. He can bear the weight of all your hopes and expectations. And he will bless you beyond anything you've ever, ever imagined.

I'm going to say a short prayer and then we're going to sing a psalm about the royal son, Psalm 89. And then I'm going to hand over to Joe for a prayer.

And then there's another song. So just a few other things. Let me pray. Father in heaven, may we have our eyes open to clearly see Jesus today. To see his goodness, to see that his ways are better than our ways.

[36 : 12] To see that he truly is the royal son, the king, the living God. And to see how he loves us. And may we put our faith and hope in him today.

Amen.