

A Song of Love

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[0 : 0 0] Anna Lauren is going to read to us from the Gospel of Luke and chapter 3. So hand over now to Anna Lauren. In the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip, tetrarch of Eturia and Trachonitis, and Licinius, tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.

He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the words of Isaiah the prophet, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, and all people will see God's salvation.

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? 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. The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

[1 : 3 3] What should we do then? The crowd asked. John answered, anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.

Even tax collectors came to be baptized. Teacher, they said, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you are required to, he told them. Then some soldiers asked him, and what should we do?

He replied, don't extort money, and don't accuse people falsely. Be content with your pay. The people were waiting expectantly, and were all wondering in their hearts, if John might possibly be the Messiah.

I was watching TV earlier this week, and my family love a program called Would I Lie to You? It's a sort of panel show, different people come on, and they're asked to sort of read out a card with some ridiculous story on it, and then the rest of the panelists have to decide, is it a liar, is it true?

And one of the funniest people that you get on Would I Lie to You is a guy called Bob Mortimer, comedian. And some of the stories he's got are absolutely hilarious. So, I was talking about that with somebody else, and they said, you should watch a program that Bob Mortimer does with Paul Whitehouse called Gone Fishing.

[2 : 5 7] It's just two guys going fishing, and talking about life. So, I thought I would tune in, see if it's any good. And it's really two older blokes, they're probably about 10 years older than I am.

And they've both got heart problems, and so off they go fishing, and as they fish, they just chat about life, and about their health, and their hearts, and they even do a little bit of contemplating life and death.

And, in the second episode, in the first season, they're near Hay-on-Wye, near the Welsh border, I think, and they're fishing for a fish called the barbel.

So, they're standing in a river, fishing for a barbel, which is a big fish, and it's got four fingers at the front of its face, sort of flapping about. So, it's quite an unusual little fish, and they're not having any luck.

And they start talking about their health problems. So, I'm going to read a little bit of what they say in this TV program, and I'm going to read three different voices, all in my voice.

[4 : 01] So, one is Paul, one is Bob, and one's a vicar that they meet. So, Paul, Bob, and the vicar have this conversation. So, first of all, it's just Paul and Bob standing in the river.

And Paul says, I thought I was going to have a heart attack recently, but it was in digestion. I think, I'm going to die.

And I suddenly went, okay, all right, okay. I didn't think I was going to meet my maker or anything like that. I just thought about my children.

I had to make my peace with it. So, I looked out the window and thought, well, it's not been that bad. Then Bob says this. Bob says, when you say meet your maker, you know that church we've passed?

We should go and ask the vicar. Paul, what, do you think they're going to have the answers? Bob, let's just see what happens then. Paul, they're not going to know.

[5 : 03] They're not going to have the answers. And then the next scene we see in the program is cuts away. And we see Bob and Paul sitting in the church in a pew and sitting in front of them as this vicar.

So Bob's chatting to the vicar and he says this. He says, I was just thinking about infant school, heaven and hell. Is there an element of totting up in terms of what happens when you die?

Vicar. Is there a judgment at the other end? I imagine there is. And I guess the thing about it is repentance. If you do something appalling and you genuinely repent, which is facing up to what you're doing and taking responsibility for it, then I think there is repentance.

Bob. Oh, well, that's good news for me. I always feel very guiltily after I've done things I shouldn't have done. I put it down to having been brought up properly.

And then the vicar says to Bob, vicar says, what do you do with your guilt? Bob. Well, it does dissipate. It goes away.

[6 : 11] And I get on with my next endeavor. Paul. He is very shallow. And then the vicar turns to Paul and says, but is that what worries you? Judgment.

Paul says, it doesn't particularly worry me. I don't think I'm going to be judged. Paul. Bob then says to Paul, let's hope not. Then Paul says this.

He says, I am quite nice. I've done some bad things, but I haven't committed genocide or anything like that. Bob. Oh, well done. Well done, Paul.

Well done. So that's just a kind of little scenario that these two guys have a conversation with a minister about the idea of judgment and, and I, the ideas of repentance and heaven and hell.

And that takes us to the passage that we're looking at. So we've got John the Baptist talking about the very same issue of repentance 2000 years ago. And you might think, well, that's 2000 years ago.

[7 : 14] we've moved on from all of that. And certainly that's kind of Paul White's Whitehouse's attitude, isn't it? You know, I'm not going to be judged, but, but Morton was a bit more like, is there this totting up, you know, and you can't just dismiss all.

I've never committed genocide, so I'm fine. And, and so that's kind of where we're going to go this morning is we're going to think about this issue of repentance. Because Luke through what he shows of John the Baptist here is saying something really important.

He's saying that to know Jesus and to be with Jesus for this life and for eternity, we have to repent of sin. And the reality of that repentance is seen in a changed life.

I often think about John the Baptist as a kind of Johnny Cash figure, Johnny Cash country singer, an outsider, an anti-establishment kind of guy who captures the imagination of the masses.

And that's kind of what John the Baptist is like. You know, he's, he's an outsider. He's anti-establishment. Uh, we, we read later in Luke's gospel. And in fact, in this very chapter that he's beheaded because of what he says, uh, to Herod.

[8 : 31] Um, and he's a preacher. Verse three tells us he is a man with a message. He's preaching this whole idea of preaching. So important to, to, to, to the ministry of John the Baptist, of Jesus, of the disciples and of the new Testament church.

Christians are people with a message that they share, that they proclaim that they preach. And, uh, here's this outsider coming with his message, which is opposed by the establishment.

We read about the establishment figures, uh, Caesar and pilot and headed and others in the early part of the chapter. And then comes this outsider with a very different message that will appall these establishment figures, but that does captivate the masses who come out into the Jordan region to hear what he has to say.

So John's preaching this message. John the Baptist is preaching this message of repentance. And I want us to think about that message today as if it was a song.

And I'm going to say, uh, several things about this song. First of all, I'm going to say it's a song for a King. Then I'm going to say it's a song of contrition. It's a song that he had to sing. It's a harvest song and it's a love song.

[9 : 44] So I just want to understand what Paul, what John the Baptist is saying here in these verses, uh, by thinking about it as a song, uh, that's got all these different great aspects to it.

It's first of all, a song for a King. It's a Royal song. There is a new King coming. And we need to be ready. That's what John wants everybody to hear.

Uh, it's been a really tricky week. Uh, quite a lot of you who tune into the service, quite a lot of people who live in, in Morningside and Brunfield are, are from the United States and a hard week for people seeing the events in the U S uh, a transition of power that should be orderly and smooth has turned out to be anything but that.

Well, here John is telling others of a new King who is coming. One who is greater than Caesar or any other.

A kingdom who is greater than any other earthly ruler and whose kingdom will endure forever. And John wants them to know this King is coming.

[10 : 55] So please get ready. And how do you prepare yourself for the coming of King Jesus? Well, he knows that your, your, your birth, your nationality, your nationhood, your ethnicity, your religion, your moral stature, none of these things make us ready for the coming of King Jesus.

What's required is repentance. So in verse three of chapter three, we read this, John went into the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

John preaches, repent so that you can be forgiven. And those who do repent are baptized. And the baptism is a sign of the inward cleansing that comes as they repent and are forgiven.

Their guilt has been dealt with. I don't know if you followed what I was doing with Paul Whitehouse and Bob Mortimer, but the vicar said to Paul, to Bob Mortimer, what do you do with your guilt?

And he just says, well, you know, it just kind of dissipates. It sort of floats away. And then I just get on with the next thing. And that's probably true for all of us. You know, we'll all feel guilty about stuff at times and struggle with our feelings of guilt.

[12 : 22] And then we kind of move on. But even if we don't feel guilty any longer with some stuff, the fact of our guilt before God will remain until we repent.

We are guilty in the sight of a holy God. And we need forgiveness. And to be forgiven, we have to repent. There is a king coming.

This is a song about a king. And this king is coming with glory, with holiness and power. And to prepare for his coming, John says, we all need to repent.

So it is, secondly, a song of penitence, a song of contrition. What does it mean to repent? That's not everyday language for most of us anymore, is it?

Repentance is about a change of direction. You know, you're going that way, traveling away from God. And then suddenly, you turn your life around, and you say, no, actually, I want to turn my life back to God, and move closer to him.

[13 : 33] We move towards sin, things that we choose, that we know God doesn't want for us. And then we begin to reject that sin, and to move back to God.

So this New Testament idea of repentance, indicates a change of mind and heart, that leads to a change in behavior, which is what we see with the people later in this story. Some of us, if we were brought up in the Presbyterian church, were taught something called the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

There's a question in the catechism I'm going to read to you about repentance. It says, what is repentance unto life? Okay, so repentance is life-giving. Repentance unto life is a saving grace.

It's a gift. Whereby a sinner, that's me, out of a true sense of my sin, it's terrible, and apprehension there is mercy, of the mercy of God in Christ, doth or does, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose and endeavor after new obedience.

You turn from an old way, a disobedient way of living, to a new way, an obedient way of living, and you do that out of a sense of contrition, and apprehension of God's mercy in Christ.

[14 : 58] We read about John's ministry, his song of repentance, his preaching of repentance, and Luke says, as it's written in the book, this is verse four, of the words of Isaiah the prophet, the voice of one calling in the desert.

That's John the Baptist. Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low, the crooked road shall become straight, the rough ways smooth, all mankind will see God's salvation.

So John is coming in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. And that prophecy shows that as God is at work, bringing his salvation plan to its full realization, then the mountains are brought low and the valleys are raised up.

The creation prepares for the coming of the king. The creation rolls out a red carpet for the arrival of the savior.

And a contrite heart, a repentant heart, is a sign that we are preparing ourselves for the coming of the king.

[16 : 17] Contrition means to feel remorse, regret, a recognition of the wrong that we've done. I was reading Isaiah chapter 57 earlier this week and I was really struck by what it said.

It says this, this is what the high and exalted one says. He who lives forever, whose name is holy. I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, to revive the heart of the contrite.

This is a deep sorrow, a contrition over the wrong that we've done. It's a penitent song. And that contrition, that regret, that sorrow, when it's a repentant sorrow, it leads us towards God, to cry out to God for forgiveness, for cleansing.

And if, sometimes our sorrow and our regrets are self-destructive, aren't they? We just hate on ourselves. We push ourselves down.

We hurt ourselves further. We try and push our feelings of guilt into some kind of oblivion. Our shame drags us down.

[17 : 36] That's not what we're talking about here. We're talking about a realism about what's wrong, but an apprehension, a realism about the love that God has for us and the forgiveness that he can give to us.

And so out of guilt, we move to God in repentance. So it's a song about a king who is coming. It's a song about contrition.

And it's a song that John had to sing. I was watching an interview with Johnny Cash earlier this week. Just the last interview he recorded, not long before his, a number of months before his death.

And the interviewer was asking him about songs that he'd written that had proven to be pretty controversial and that had drawn a lot of flack and a lot of criticism. Why did you sing these songs when it brought so much approbation?

It was a question. And Johnny Cash just said, I didn't just want to sing what people wanted to hear. He said, these songs came from somewhere deep inside me and they just had to get out.

[18 : 47] I didn't care what people thought. I just had to say these things. And John the Baptist is like that. This is a song he's got to sing. He meets with a lot of approbation.

It's not what everyone wants to hear, but it's what God has given him to say and so he says it. He speaks as the one who is called.

Isaiah 40, that quote in verses 4 to 6 is a reminder. John the Baptist responds to the call of God in his life to say the things that God has given him to say about the coming of the Messiah.

He's the last of the Old Testament prophets preparing the way for the coming Messiah. But we can see here too that his preaching is also colored by other Old Testament prophecies about the day of the Lord and the coming of the wrath of God.

And so we can think about Isaiah chapter 13, verse 9. See the day of the Lord is coming, a cruel day with wrath and fierce anger to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it.

[19 : 53] Or Malachi chapter 3, verse 2, who can endure the day of the coming, who can stand when he appears, for he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

So these verses are in the background as John speaks. God is coming, and in his coming there is a judgment. And so he wants to say, people get ready.

Be contrite. Prepare your hearts for the coming of the Lord, the day of when you see the King. He wants everybody to be ready to respond to the Messiah.

There's a universal relevance to what he says, isn't it? He says in verse 6, which is the quote from Isaiah, the end of that quote from Isaiah 40, all mankind will see God's salvation.

So there's this universal relevance to it. All people will see God's salvation. And what happens? That's the prophecy speaking about the ministry of John.

[20 : 57] So John goes out into the desert. And what happens? All mankind comes to the desert. All kinds of people begin to come out into the Jordan region to hear what John has to say.

And what does John have to say to them? Well, no punches pulled. You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

That's the background of the day of the Lord. Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. So as audience gathers, what does John say to him?

He says, man, you're like a bunch of snakes. And there's a desert fire. There's a bush fire. And the snakes come out of their holes in the ground and they flee from the fire. That's you, my friend.

Now, if I said that to anyone, I think my family would say, dad, don't be so rude. You know, how can you be so rude to everybody?

[21 : 59] Call them snakes or vipers. John is rude, isn't he? He's confrontational. What do people do with these harsh words?

Do they turn their backs and walk away from John? Because he's saying such unpopular things. Well, actually, we find they don't turn their backs.

That what John the Baptist says about this coming judgment strikes a chord deep within them. There was a survey done about a year or two with, and it was a questionnaire put to 13 to 22-year-old adults.

And it was a question about Generation Z. Gen Z. And they were asked to come up with a slogan for Gen Zers. And the overwhelmingly most popular kind of slogan was something along the lines of be yourself or just be you or just be yourself, do what makes you happy.

So that's the kind of slogan for the Gen Zers. Be you. Just do you. And that's a cry, isn't it, for authenticity. In a world where, with social media, there's so many pressures to try and be someone you're not, it's good to be reminded to be yourself, to be authentic.

[23 : 27] But our authenticity needs reality, doesn't it? And Paul says that, or Paul, John the Baptist says, part of that realism is we're all sinners.

And that is a hard thing to hear without running away. You know, we lie, we cheat, we steal, we hurt people, we don't love God, we're selfish, we don't love other people the way we should love them.

We betray, we gossip, we backstab. You know, there's lots of stuff that we all do that God says he will judge us for, that God says we need forgiveness for these things.

You know, and John the Baptist has to point out in verse 8, he has to say, you know, don't tell yourself because you're Jewish, because his audience here was largely Jewish, we have Abraham as our father.

You know, so that's like saying, this doesn't apply to me. I'm not going to be judged, I'm one of the good guys. I tell you that out of these stones, God could raise up children for Abraham. So God can create a family out of anything.

[24 : 38] So it's not your religion or your ethnicity or your moral standing. I can't turn around to God today and say, God, I'm a free church minister, I preach the Bible every Sunday, I'm one of the good guys, I know I'm not going to be judged.

It just doesn't work that way. That's the way we want it to work, isn't it? We all want to say, I'm one of the good guys, God would never judge me. It's what Paul Whitehouse said, he said, you know, I'm not going to be judged. You know, I'm a nice guy, I haven't done genocide.

And Bob Mortar says, well done. You know, he kind of sees the irony of that, doesn't he? That Paul's letting himself off the hook a little too easily there. And we all want to let ourselves off the hook in this regard.

But your sins are sins and your sins are grievous. And they offend God. And one sin, one small sin, is enough to separate you from God eternally.

Because God is so holy that nothing sinful and no one sinful can enter his presence. So we've all sinned.

[25 : 55] That's what John the Baptist has to say. That's the message, the unpopular message that he has to get out. So it's a song about a king. It's a song of contrition.

It's a song he had to sing. It's a song about a harvest. It's a song about what kind of fruit, what kind of harvest our life bears. Now there's a word play or there's a word used, sorry, here in Luke's writing that doesn't come across in most of the translations.

And it's a word about bearing fruit or bearing a harvest and doing. So in verse 8, we see it quite clearly. It says, produce fruit.

In verse 9, it says, the axe is already at the root of the tree.

Every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down. So that's the same word twice. Verse 8, produce fruit. And verse 9, the tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down.

[27 : 01] And then verse 10 in most translations will say then, what shall we do? The crowd ask. And what the crowd actually says, what shall we produce? What fruit do you want from us?

And then in verse 12, the tax collectors come and say, what should we do? What should we produce? And verse 14, the soldiers ask, what should we do?

What should we produce? So that's the dominant idea in those verses is what does our life produce? What are we doing with our lives? What's the harvest of our lives? What's the impact?

What's the fruit of our lives? Because when we repent, the fruit of our lives changes. We go from disobedience to a life where we want to live on obedience to the will and the purposes of God.

And that needs to be seen in your life. There needs to be a new harvest. If repentance is real, a change will come. And that change will be different in all of us because the sins we struggle with are different.

[28 : 04] But there's kind of broad themes that John points out. He talks about generosity, doesn't he? You know, if you've got two tunics, give one away to those who need it. Give away your food to those who need it.

So it's be generous and share. And then people come and they ask him about stuff related to their own particular vocations and occupations, tax collectors who raised money for the Romans and were known to fleece people ruthlessly as a result of the privileged position that they had.

They were wealthy and they just used their position to get more and more wealthy. Well, what should we do? Don't collect any more than you should. That's the fruit seen in the way that they go about their work.

Then some soldiers come. Soldiers were not rich. They were poor. They were paid minimum wage. So what did they do? They would grab people, threaten them, and extort money out of them to kind of pad their income.

They're saying, he's saying, no, no, no, don't do that. Be content. So several things about how we go about our work. One, be generous. Share what you have.

[29 : 08] Two, be content. Don't always be looking for more, but be content and thankful with what God's given to you. Three, don't use power in the wrong way.

Tax collectors and soldiers had power that they used to harm and exploit others. The way we use power in the church or in any vocation is really important. If we have authority in any sense, we need to wield that authority with humility and love and grace.

What's your vocation in life? What's your calling? What are your responsibilities, privileges, opportunities? opportunities? You have to work out for all these things.

How do I bear good fruit that reflects the fact that I've turned away from sinful paths and now I'm a follower of Jesus? How can people see that in the way that I go about my calling, my vocation and my work?

So it's a harvest song. What is your life producing? Is it producing the good fruit? And lastly, it is a love song. So we want love songs, don't we? What brings us to repent?

[30 : 20] Well, two things at work, isn't it? There's a sense of fear often that leads to repentance. You know, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?

So there's a fearfulness about the cost of sin sometimes that brings repentance in our life. Isaiah 57, which I read from earlier, at the end of the chapter it says this, there is no peace for the wicked.

You know, we experience the turmoil, the chaos of sin in our lives and we get tired of it. And so we repent. The lies, the deceit, the greed, the never-been-satisfied, the anger eating away at us, all these things, they wear us out, they bring us down, we have no peace.

Isaiah 57, the wicked are like the tossing sea which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. Life becomes foggy, muddy, confusing.

The dirt, the stain is all around. So we get weary of our sin. We have no peace in ourselves or with God and so we're fearful and we cry to God for help.

[31 : 37] So that's one motive that drives us to repentance. But I want to say there's something else. And it's the motive of love. The love that drives repentance.

The fact that we can see that God loves us through his son, Jesus Christ. He's sending his Messiah into this world to be our saviour. We apprehend the mercy of God in Jesus Christ.

We see that Christ will lay down his life for our sin and so we begin to see not just the cost of our sin to us personally but the cost of our sin to Jesus who loves us and the cost that he will pay for that sin at the cross.

The weight of our sin laid on him in death and the love that brings him to that place begins to draw love out of our hearts also.

We love him more and more because he has first loved us and the more we come to love Jesus the more we'll come to hate the sin that nails Jesus to the cross.

[32 : 53] Our loves, our immorality, our greed, our deceit will grieve us more and more because we see how they grieve and wound and offend God.

So we repent not just because we fear God but because we love God. Tim Keller puts it this way. Religious repentance is selfish.

In religion we're only sorry for sin because of the consequences it has to us. It will bring us punishment and we want to avoid that so we repent. In religion like that repentance is self-centered but the gospel the good news of Jesus come to rescue us in love through the cross the gospel makes us God-centered.

In religion we're mainly sorry for the consequences of sin but in gospel we are sorry for the sin itself. I want to say this in closing that repentance is not just the way we start the Christian life.

We don't just repent as we see Jesus coming and start the Christian life in repentance. If you want to be a Christian today though that is where you start but it's also the way we go on in the Christian life.

[34 : 04] We repent every day. Martin Luther said this he said when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said repent he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.