

The Wilderness Warm Up

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's pray as we come to God's word together this morning. Heavenly Father, as we come to your timeless, perfect and life-giving words now, we bring to you our words from that last song that we are ready to surrender to you every care.

So would you come now and would you take our hands and would you lead us? Would you take our ears and would you speak to us? And would you take our hearts and would you mold us for your glory and for our good?

And this is our prayer in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Well, please do have that Luke chapter 3 passage open in front of you if you have it there.

And as Ian mentioned, we're going to be camping out in the Gospel of Luke for the next little while. I had a conversation recently with somebody in church, a new person to church, and they asked me, they said, Graham, once they'd learned my name, Graham, what is Brunsfield all about?

Great question. I don't think this person was asking me about the type of coffee that we use on a Sunday morning. I don't think they were asking me about the pews and how many we can fit in this building.

[1 : 2 0] Actually, what they were asking me is, what are you all about at Brunsfield? That's a great question. That's a great question to ask. Maybe if you're on the hunt for a church, maybe you're new to the city, you're exploring this kind of stuff.

It's a great question to ask. What are we all about? Well, as we begin this journey in Luke's Gospel over the next little while, what a great chance for us as a church community here to re-tap into what we're all about.

What are we all about? Well, we're all about Jesus Christ being the great hope of our broken world. We're all about Jesus Christ, the great light, who is the great light for our city and for our nation of Scotland that is living in darkness.

And actually, we're all about Jesus Christ, the saviour and the great transformer of our lives. That's what we're all about. Taking the Gospel to this city of Edinburgh.

So what better thing for us to do over the next little while as we hang out in this Gospel of Luke to get to know this man, Jesus Christ, better. So as Ian said, we're jumping in at chapter 3 this morning and we'll return to chapters 1 and 2.

[2 : 3 7] The Christmas story as it's told by Luke in December when the weather outside will be frightful, but the fire inside will be delightful. We'll come back to chapters 1 and 2.

But this is the Gospel according to Luke. Luke, who is a doctor by profession and he's a man whose services have been employed by another man who you'll see at the end of verse 3 of chapter 1, is called Theophilus.

Now what on earth is Theophilus doing hiring Luke? Well, you see, Theophilus wants what I want in my life. Theophilus wants what you want in your life.

And Theophilus wants what the people in our world, what they want in their lives. And you'll see it at verse 4 of chapter 1. What does he want?

He wants certainty. Or if you've got an NIV there, it says that you may know the truth. This is what Theophilus wants. He wants something in his life that he can build it on.

[3 : 49] Something solid. Something trustworthy. Something that's been looked into. Something that's unchanging. Something that is eternally true. He wants to base his life on those things.

Does that know what you want for your life? It's what I want for my life. It's what I want for my family's life. It's what I want for my church family's life. That we would base our lives on something that is certain.

It's not the world we're living in. A world, what is it marked by? Uncertainties. In our world of Brexit, what is the future going to hold? In our world of fluctuating economies.

In our world of unemployment. I was speaking to a pastor recently up in Aberdeen. Many of his congregation work in the oil sector. Sunday before he meets them, the job's going great.

The very next Sunday they've got the redundancy package in their hands. Uncertainties in our world. Sudden illnesses. Unexplainable tragedies.

[4 : 48] What does Theophilus want? Something certain to base his life upon. He wants to be certain about the things that he's heard about this man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Who he is. What people say about him. Is it just an old wife's tale? Because if it is an old wife's tale, would you just tell me the truth? Because I can get on with my life.

I can drink and be merry. I can live for the moment. And as the cool kids are saying these days, just to show you that I'm down with the cool kids. Y-O-L-O.

You only live once. Because that's the world that we live in if this is not true. But if it is true, says Theophilus. If it is true.

If this stuff about Jesus is true. Then that changes absolutely everything. So look, I need to be certain. And what does Luke write at verse 3 of chapter 1?

[5 : 44] He says, Theophilus, I've researched this man, Jesus Christ, closely now for some time. I've followed up in the leads. I've asked the eyewitnesses. And here is your certainty. His gospel is all about certainty.

This isn't just a biography of this man, Jesus Christ. This is certainty. And it's the story of God's great rescue plan for the world. That's what Luke's gospel is.

And I guess chapters 1 and 2, if we just give a run up to chapter 3 that we'll come back to in a few weeks time, as I said. Chapters 1 and 2 have been the anticipatory story of two boys.

John the Baptist and Jesus. As we'll see in a few weeks time, as you follow Luke chapter 1 and Luke chapter 2, the stories of their lives, they almost run in parallel.

Luke tells the story of their two oh-so-natural, yet oh-so-supernatural births. Luke tells us about their two sets of parents.

[6 : 48] Luke tells us two sets of prophecies which have been made about them, about what these boys will be and what they will do with their lives. And at chapter 3 and verse 1, where I invite you to turn now, and as Jesus and John the Baptist, as they're probably about 30 years of age, we see John the Baptist step into the public arena.

And so the question is, what will John the Baptist be like? Well, I had the great privilege on Friday just there of marrying Becky and Struan, two young people who come to this church.

And it was a wonderful day. A wonderful day. It was a very Scottish day. It was a McDonald's marrying a gamble up in Inverness. You don't get much more Scottish than that.

I thought they were going to shout, freedom! As they walked up the aisle. But that never happened. This was the picture book Scottish wedding. Now, I've been to a lot of weddings in my time.

I've done the usher thing. I've done the best man thing. And by God's grace, would you believe it, I've done the groom thing. But I've never done the minister thing. This is the first time I've ever done the minister thing.

[8 : 00] So I'm standing at the front of the church with the groom and his best man. And the moment comes where the usher at the back of the hall, he gives me the nod as if to say the bride is here. And in those two minutes before she walks down the aisle, your job is to get people prepared for her coming.

So you need to get your phones off. You need to get your phone, at the very least, on silent. You need to make sure your hat is in the right place. You need to make sure that you've got your seat with a view. You need to make sure that you've got your order of service.

You need to make sure that you know what you're doing. You need to make sure that the camera has got enough space for photos on it. Or if you use your camera on your phone, that you've got enough space there for it. You need to get yourself ready because the moment that we've all been waiting for is about to happen.

So let me ask you again. Are you ready? John the Baptist, as we meet him here in chapter 3, is one who has come to get people ready.

That's his job. That's what he's all about. He is the great preparer. Now Luke has given us a few indicators that that is his job so far in his gospel.

[9 : 11] Do you want to turn with me to chapter 1 and verse 17? The angel is telling John the Baptist's dad, Zechariah, about what his son will be.

What does he say that his son will do? He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord. There's that word, prepared. And if you've got chapter 1 there, verse 76 of chapter 1, Zechariah again, after he regains his speech, he prophesies about his son and he says, And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High.

For you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him. There's that word again, prepare. John the Baptist is the great preparer. And Luke in these verses wants us to know three things about John the Baptist.

He wants us to know why he is preparing. He wants us to know what he is preparing. And he wants us to know who he is preparing for.

So firstly, verses 1 to 6, Luke tells us why John is preparing. And the answer will, just like the wedding, John's arrival signifies the greater arrival of God's promised moment.

[10 : 32] Now we know for Luke that John the Baptist is no footnote in God's salvation story. Because you'll see it there, John roots, John the Baptist appearing in real context, with a real date, and in real political history.

As if to solidify for us, the readers, that John the Baptist is no mythical or allegorical figure. He really did come. And he came in this year.

He wasn't just a random bloke who turned up in the wilderness, who was doing some traveling, and who was cultivating his inner bear grills. He really did come.

And his message of grace is timely. And his coming is hugely significant. And to help us see and make that connection, Luke takes us to Isaiah chapter 40.

If you've got your Bibles there, it might be worth turning there. If not, you can maybe catch up on Isaiah 40 after this morning's service. But Isaiah chapter 40.

[11 : 41] Isaiah is prophesying to God's people who are in captivity in Babylon. They're away from their homeland. And the message from God to his people who are questioning, who are doubting, is one of comfort.

Some of them may have given up on God, but make no mistake that God hasn't given up on them. God may have punished them for their sin, but God has not forgotten them.

And what is God promising to do in Isaiah chapter 40? He's promising to act by his grace for their good and for his glory.

What is God saying? He's saying that he will come and save his people. And he will come and he will take it upon himself to win his people back.

And you'll know when that moment is here, says Isaiah, when you hear a voice crying in the wilderness. And Luke, in Luke chapter 3, he sees in full what Isaiah probably only saw in part.

[12 : 52] That John the Baptist is that voice in the wilderness. He is the one who has come, and there's our magic word again at verse 4 of chapter 3 of Luke.

To prepare the way for the Lord. John the Baptist has come and he's going to call people to repentance. That biblical word that means to turn from yourself and from your sin.

And be washed clean, as we said earlier, by the blood of Jesus Christ. And to turn the direction of your life towards God and be made right with him.

That's what it means to repent. To turn your whole life to God. And you see there in Luke chapter 3, Isaiah's picture of creation getting itself ready, of leveling itself out.

It's a picture of what we would use the term rolling out the red carpet. Isaiah is saying, when you hear that voice in the wilderness, prepare yourself, for the Lord is about to come.

[13 : 56] And John's arrival signifies that long promised moment of God's grace and salvation. And it signifies that that moment of grace and salvation is here.

I got home from church last Sunday evening and I walked into our living room and there was my mother-in-law cuddling our week-old little baby daughter, Grace.

And she said to me, she said, Graham, what does grace mean? Now talk about a gift-wrapped gospel opportunity. There you go. What does grace mean? And it was my joy to explain to her that the word grace, in its very essence, means getting something that I don't deserve.

And getting something that I have not earned. That is grace. That God would seek me out when I wasn't looking for him. That's grace.

That God would send his son to come to earth and to die in my place on the cross and offer me forgiveness. And not only to offer me forgiveness, but to adopt me as his child and to give me life by his spirit who lives in me.

[15 : 08] That's grace. That God wouldn't give up on me, even though I fail him time and time and time again. But is holding me and is committed to my goods and his glory.

And who is working in me, transforming me by his spirit to be more like his son Jesus Christ. That's grace. Let me ask you this morning, do you know what grace means?

Do you know what grace means? Do you know what grace means? Do you know what grace means?

John the Baptist's message of grace. See at verse 6. His message of grace and of repentance and forgiveness and newness is for all people.

Why is John preparing? Well, he's preparing because God's promised moment of grace and of salvation and of forgiveness is now. And so if that's why John the Baptist is preparing.

[16 : 17] See what he is preparing at verses 7 to 14. What is he preparing? He's preparing people's hearts. Now again, that's something Luke's already told us about John's ministry.

If you flick again to chapter 1 and verses 16 and 17. We see the angel telling his father, Zechariah, that his son, John, will turn the hearts of people back to their gods.

And in chapter 3, notice two things that Luke wants us to know about John and his ministry. Firstly, notice the content of John's message.

Notice the severity of his language. You brood of vipers! And see the vividness of his imagery. The axe is at the root of the tree and fruitless trees are destined for the fire.

I mean, do you see straight away that John's not got a script writer who's filtering this stuff for him? Do you see that? That he is just delivering a direct message from God that people need to get right with their creator.

[17 : 23] And it's language and it's imagery that's deliberately designed and used to wake people up. And to see the fact that you are not right with God on your own. And you need to come and to think about how you can be made right with your creator.

It's a serious thing. That God is coming. And you need to get yourself ready. You need to examine your own heart before God. And you need to do right before him.

And I guess that's the second thing to note in chapter 3. The recipients of John's message. Who is in this crowd? Well, we have religious people.

You see, we've got devout Jews, most likely, who are committed to the law of God, who know the law of God. But look who else is coming out to the wilderness to hear John preach.

And who else is responding to John's message. Verse 12, we've got tax collectors. And verse 14, we've got soldiers. So we've got two groups of people who are the most hated outsiders in that society.

[18 : 27] As if Luke wants us to know that John's message of grace, it really is. It really is for all people. That all people, no matter who you are, are called to respond with repentance and to get your heart right with God.

To turn from your old way of life and to embrace your creator, to embrace God and to embrace his ways. What does John say? You're a tax collector.

Well, be a clean tax collector. Be honest with your expenses. Don't diddle your books. You're a soldier. Be a soldier who's marked with integrity. Be content with your pay.

Speak honestly with your lips. For you see, that's what happens when God's grace, his message of grace, it hits us. As his spirit works in our lives, God begins to change us.

And he begins to change us by putting in reverse gear, as it were, the sinful habits and the sinful lifestyle that used to dominate us. You know, I heard a preacher this week tell a famous story about Harland and Wolfe, the great shipbuilding company in Belfast.

[19 : 42] Probably most famous for being the place where the Titanic was built. And at one point in their history, this shipbuilding company used to employ 35,000 men in the city of Belfast.

35,000 men in the shipyard. So you can imagine when the hooter or the siren, whoever it is, that this signaled the end of the working day is these men left en masse.

You can imagine it was the easiest thing in the world just to take a bit of metal, a bit of scrap, a bit of ship and just put it under your jacket and just walk out. I mean, there is no policing 35,000 men en masse, is there?

So things started to go missing from this warehouse. But in one of those periods of revival in Northern Ireland, many of those 35,000 men were converted to Jesus Christ.

And as the gospel hit them, and as the grace of God started to work in their lives, and as the Spirit of God started to poke and to prod at areas in their life that needed to change, all of a sudden these converted men started to bring back to the shipyard all those little bits of ship and metal and scrap that they'd stolen.

[20 : 54] So much so, such was the scale of the work of grace, of transforming grace in the lives of these men, that eventually the directors of Harland and Wolfe had to write to these men and say, please, please, please, would you stop bringing back all those bits of ship that you've stolen?

Because we simply do not have the space in our warehouses to deal with all this bits of machinery. I wonder what that might look like in your life this morning.

Is there anything that you need to stop doing as you get your heart right with God? Is there anything that you need to start doing in order to get your heart right with God?

Friends, is there evidence in our lives that our hearts are right with our Creator? You know, Sinclair Ferguson puts it well when he says, we can't fully grip onto Christ if we're still fully gripping to our sinful habits and lifestyle.

What does John the Baptist say to the people who are coming to him? He says, bear fruit in keeping with repentance. Turn your life to God and turn it to his ways.

[22 : 09] Take responsibility for your sin and come clean before your holy God and ask that he would be gracious to you. And come to the God who loves justice and who calls his people to act with humility.

And come to the God who bestows transforming grace on those who are truly undeserving. What is John preparing? He's preparing people's hearts.

And thirdly, who is John preparing for? Well, verses 15 to 20, he's preparing the way for Jesus Christ, the Messiah. The Messiah, that little word that's packed full of meaning and with expectation, that literally means God's anointed one.

God's anointed one who will come to save his people. Now, you can understand as we read these verses, having experienced 400 years of silence as it were up to this point, that when the people encounter John and as they hear his direct and powerful and explosive preaching, that people begin to think that he is the one.

But what does John say? He says, don't look at me. Don't look at me. Look at the one who's coming after me. You see, this man, John the Baptist, he's a man who lives for the glory of another.

[23 : 32] And in that respect, just to return to the wedding, do you see that John isn't as much like the minister? But actually, he's a lot like the best man. What does a best man do on his day?

He makes sure that everything on the day goes smoothly. He makes sure that everybody is ready. He holds the rings and at the right time, he hands them over at the right moment. He bigs up the groom in his speech.

Neil, I hope you did that the other day. But he does everything in his power to make sure that the spotlight does not shine on him, but the spotlight shines on the groom. This is what John the Baptist is all about.

He lives for the glory of another. What does he say at verse 16? Listen to this language. The one who will come after me. What? I am not worthy to untie the straps of his sandals.

Sandals, smelly, sweaty, horrible feet. Which is a job in John's day that is done by a servant and a slave. Even that job with this man, I am not worthy to do, says John the Baptist.

[24 : 37] Is that not the language of a good best man? Living for the glory of another. Let me ask you this morning, we might not have the ministry of John the Baptist, but do you have the mindset of John the Baptist?

Does your life point to the glory of another? In a few weeks' time, probably next Sunday actually, we welcome a lot of students back to Brunsfield.

University terms kick off again. I can see you've met some students already. You're here this morning. But I know that it's always term time. And it's the beginning of term time. Because when you walk down to Toll Cross from here, there's always that guy who's standing in the corner who works for Domino's Pizza.

And he's dressed as a giant pizza box. And on him it says, any pizza, any size, \$6.99. You know that guy? All over the city. But there's a guy whose job it is not to attract attention to him, but to point you somewhere else.

Let me ask you this morning, do you have that mindset? Are you that walking billboard who points people to the glory of another?

[25 : 47] Do you see that John exemplifies what should be true in all of our lives this morning, that we should be that walking billboard? It's pointing people not to our greatness, but to the greatness of Jesus Christ.

We should have that attitude and mindset that says, don't look at me, please don't look at me and my greatness. Because there is no greatness there. But would you look to my Savior Jesus Christ and to his greatness? See, John knows in these verses that what he's doing is just symbolic.

That the baptism that he's doing is just water. What is he doing? He's just preparing the way for the one who will come after him. The one who will come after him and be the true life giver. The one who will come after him and be the true spirit giver.

The one who will come after him and be the true life transformer. And what will he do? He will come to judge the world. He will come to judge and to hold every human being accountable to him.

And he will come to put wrongs to right. And he will come to separate the genuine from the fake. That will be Jesus Christ. That's what he will come to do.

[26 : 57] And John says to his generation, how do you respond? Are you ready? Are you prepared for the one who is to come? Get your heart right before him because this is serious. Now let me ask you, I wonder how you respond this morning to John's message.

I think Luke deliberately, he brings our attention to three such responses in this passage. And as we move towards a close, let me just bring these three responses that Luke draws to our attention, to our attention.

See firstly that there's a reaction of presumption. Verses 7 and 8. Religious people, they come to John and they assume that this message is for everyone else and not for them.

That because they have a certain heritage and because they do certain things, they think that they're exempt from facing up to this challenge. That somehow they've been written into heaven on their forefathers' wills.

And what does John say? It doesn't work like that. And so some of us here this morning who are presuming on God's grace. Are you presuming that because you do certain things, that because you come to church, because you sing certain songs to God and his direction, that because you tithe?

[28 : 11] Are you presuming because you don't do certain things, because you don't swear, because you don't sleep around, that those things somehow put you right with God on their own? I wonder if some of us need reminded of that age-old kid song this morning that man looks on the outside, but God looks on the heart.

Presumption. Second reaction, see it in verses 10 to 14. It's conviction. People who come to John and who hear his message and know instantly by God's Spirit working in them that they need to change.

Change. You know, I wonder if, as God has been speaking to us through his word this morning, have you been convicted? Has the Holy Spirit of God, has he put the finger right on an issue in your life?

If so, can I ask you to be encouraged by that? That God is working in your life? And can I encourage you as well to see that as the knife of God's word goes into your heart, that this isn't the knife of a murderer, that actually this is the knife of a divine loving surgeon.

And that knife is marked grace. So if you've been convicted this morning, go with that conviction. Go with the Spirit of God. And the third reaction in verses 19 and 20 is one of rejection.

[29 : 33] And Luke tells us about the reaction of King Herod as John so brashly has to be said. He points out to him his moral insensitivity and his ethical failure.

You see, Luke is telling us in these verses that being in a place of power, the high and mighty are not exempt from responding to God's message of grace and their need of repentance. What can Herod, what does Herod do rather?

He can't handle the truth. And so he seeks to squash the truth. And he's defensive when he's confronted with his sin. And Luke wants us to know in these verses that by doing that, by locking up John in prison, that actually Herod is adding yet another evil thing to his already growing and expanding list.

Here is a person, King Herod, who is rejecting God's gracious message. I wonder how you respond this morning to what we've read and what we've heard about John the Baptist's message.

If you're rejecting it, then see the seriousness of what you are doing. And let's be reminded again, as it says in these verses, that this message is one of good news.

[30 : 47] It's good news. As I said, we've got students returning in the next couple of weeks and we always try and bless the students that come here to Brunsfield just by giving them free things.

We all like free things. We're all Scottish, don't we? But particularly we do it with students and we try and give them a book of some sort that they can read. And we did this one last year and I think we've got a few copies left over if anyone wants to take this one away today.

This is a resource that's been produced by 10 of those and it's a cookbook. But it's a cookbook that contains testimonies in it of university students who have been converted and turned to Jesus during their time at university.

And I think the hope is, we used to do this in our flat at university all the time, that as you're cooking and as you're waiting for the pasta to boil, that actually you'll look and you'll flick through and you'll think, oh, there's Ed's story. There is Dan's story.

There is Joanna's story. Well, let me read to you as we finish Anthony's story. Anthony is a politics student at the University of Nottingham and this is his testimony of God's transforming grace in his life.

[31 : 54] Anthony writes this, When I set off for university, I was excited. I made friends quickly and my course was great. Getting good drug connections was easy.

And there were girls absolutely everywhere. I got very into going out every night and smashing it. My choices of drugs became more exotic and the quantities became more reckless.

Outwardly, everything looked fine. And I felt I was pretty cool. I had made the right friends and in a way I was having a good time. But inside, I was empty. I started to do things which surprised even me, like cheating on my girlfriend and allowing my relationship with my parents to deteriorate.

And I would wake up with a heavy burden of guilt and the fear of someone who was beginning to lose control. These feelings, they grew in me like mold growing in the dark.

Yet now and then, I would remember that friend who told me about Jesus. One night, I was back home from uni alone in my room. I had a habit at this point of buying some weed every day, finishing it and feeling unsatisfied.

[32 : 57] My mind and my body were in a very bad shape and I was completely unprepared for the exams I would soon have to sit. I knew I needed to ask for help.

I thought I had nothing to lose, so I thought I had asked Jesus to help me. I told him I was sorry and I ignored him all this time and that I was in trouble. And I asked him to help, even though I had done so many bad things.

And immediately, my hair stood up and it felt as though I was being filled up with water. I flicked open the Bible that I had been given by my friend and the page fell open to, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, Matthew 5.3.

I felt that Jesus was in the room beside me and it was as if he was speaking these words to me. Something that had been dead inside me came alive that night. In the following weeks, I continued to live the same way I had been, but it felt different.

I was changing from the inside out and I began to hate the things I used to love. As God showed me his love, his kindness and his forgiveness, my habit with drugs fell off me.

[34 : 09] He is so much more real now than anything I've ever known before. Isn't that awesome? There is a story of God's transforming grace. As we finish this morning, let me ask you how you respond to that message.

You know, we're going to move into a time of communion in just a moment. And just before I pray to close, why don't we just take a moment of silence? And let's respond to God's word this morning as we prepare our hearts before him.

And so, gracious God, a loving Heavenly Father, we praise you for your kindness to us.

Thank you, Father, that as we respond to the message of the gospel, and as we see your story and message of grace, that we truly are those who are undeserving. But yet we are truly those who have been blessed in every way in Jesus Christ.

Help us to be those who respond to your message of grace. And may your Spirit who lives in us continue to change us and to mold us.

[35 : 21] Our Father, we ask you would help us in our world of such uncertainty. Be those who live with a certain message of Jesus Christ. May we live for his glory this week, we ask.

Because we ask in his name. Amen.