

esus is the light of the world. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. "In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind" (John 1:4). Light is associated with knowledge. There is knowledge to share, insight to gain. When we are in the dark, we are blind; but when we are in the light, we see. Light is purifying truth. Life is a little different. When we think of life, we think of activity. Jesus brings a new way of life, a new way of living in this world. HIs ways are actually life-bringing instead of life-sucking. Following the mission of Jesus means being those who convey His light and His life to the world.

## LIGHT AND LIFE • Luke 3:4-18 • Tim McConnell • January 20, 2019

That John the Baptist is some kind of preacher, isn't he? Wish I preached more like that? The funny thing is verse 18 tells us this is John's "good news" preaching style. This is what it sounds like when he's delivering the good news. Which do you prefer, the good news or the bad news? Let me take a poll. When someone asks you if you want the good news or the bad news, which do you choose? How many of you take the good news first? See, that makes sense. Give me the good news then I'll be able to take the bad news and it won't seem too bad. But how many would take the bad news first? Yeah, that's how I am. I want to get the bad news out of the way so I can enjoy the good news, and just linger in it! "And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them" (Luke 3:18). Does this message sound like good news? The only way this is good news is if he's right, if the turnaround is possible, if there is a new way of life possible because of Jesus.

Where do we go to engage life-sized questions? Some questions are bigger than others. You're at work when your boss lets you know you might be up for promotion, but it will require a move. All of a sudden your day includes a career-sized question. You have to make room for it. The relationship with your husband that has worked day in and day out for five, or ten or fifteen years suddenly doesn't seem to be working today, or this week or this month. You are suddenly in a marriage-sized question. It has to be taken at that level of seriousness. A lot of the mistakes we make in life come when we apply the wrong-sized answers to the questions we face. We apply a day-sized answer to a life-sized question and things go haywire. Today is called Sanctity of Life Sunday for pro-life churches. Wherever you might be on that issue, the healthiest churches and healthiest Crisis Pregnancy Centers I have been a part of find a way to lovingly express that we believe the size of the question deserves a rightsized answer. Please don't apply a school-, or career-, or convenience-sized answer to a life-sized question. Your heart may regret it one day. We lost a young man to suicide last week in our community. With suicide prevention, talking about suicide, you just want to get the message across—don't apply a permanent solution to what is ultimately a temporary problem. Please don't. We need life-sized answers.

I don't know what compelled all these people to go out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist. He had an amazing way of ripping them to pieces and convincing them it was good news! I'd bet every one of them had their finger on something, some question, some issue, life-sized enough to make them get up from work—on a Tuesday or whatever—change their plans and go. Life-sized questions need life-sized answers, you see. If we don't get life-sized answers to life-sized questions we can get the biggest things wrong. The people went out to John looking for lifesized answers.

We didn't read verses 1-2, but it gives the date (biblical texts give the date by listing leaders), then it says: "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (Luke 3:2). This is a big statement. After hundreds of years of silence from the prophets of God, the Word of God came to John in the desert. Luke's account frames John's ministry in Isaiah. With the written Word. If you are at all looking for God's voice to speak in life-sized ways to life-sized issues, it starts with the Word of God. In this case, with Isaiah's promise that the Messiah is on the way. Every valley, every low place and gap, will be filled up with fullness. Every mountain, every impediment to the way of life God brings will be dropped to the floor and laid flat. And let me give you the ESV here (verse 6): "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Luke 3:6). "Flesh" is significant. Flesh is an important category in the Bible. Flesh is that part of us that wants to run from God, that flees the Lord. If I could put it this way, flesh is that part of you that you are sick of dealing with. Even flesh sees salvation. This isn't just an idea, this coming of Jesus the Messiah. The way of life Jesus is bringing isn't just a wish—it's a flesh and blood reality. A new way of life touches down in Jesus.

There's your text. Here comes your message. How should John start? A nice opener to connect with the audience and maybe raise a few laughs? Here it comes: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?" (Luke 3:7). Okay, that's another way to go, sure. You brood of vipers. It's not a compliment. But it's also not a loose-cannon insult. Jesus later says the very same thing in Matthew 23 where I'd say His message gets hotter than John's! Imagine a knot of snakes writhing around the bottom of a pit. Who can survive contact with them? To be among them at all is to invite being attacked, poisoned, even killed. The only way to be among them is to become one of them, see. They can live around each other, but only because each one is just as poisonous and biting as the next. Are you making any connection? How much time do we spend swimming with the snakes at the bottom of the well? How much marinating in cynicism and poison can your soul take? How much are you sticking your hand down, spending time with a

brood of vipers? Enough to become one? Anyway, the message of John is a very direct attack—the current way of life is not the way of life, it's the way of death. Stop. Turnaround. Find a new path. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance—"repentance" means turning around. It's good news because it announces a new possibility. You can turn around now.

"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 ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:8-9. Okay. This is John's "walk the walk, don't just talk the talk" kind of speech. Don't just jump in my river here and pretend everything's new, then go back to the same game you've been playing. And don't expect your family line to save you either. There are no grandkids in God's family, just kids. Jesus isn't impressed that your parents were faithful, or your grandmother was a believer—not when it comes to your soul. Your faith is what matters, get it? These are very big terms John puts on the table. The ax is at the root. The covenant is not a matter of genetics. Belonging to God is not a birthright. Your faith matters. Your decisions matter. Your own relationship with God is the question. If you are not going to root your life in God, if you are not going to live out what God is pouring in, you are as good as dead—like a branch clipped off the tree or a vine ripped out of the soil. That's John's point. This is a life-sized question.

The people knew just how big a question this was, and just how big an answer they needed. So they started asking. "'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'" (Luke 3:10-11). The question tells us that the crowd knew just how serious of a predicament they were in. Their place in the family of God seems to be on the table. This is a life-sized question. What should we do with our lives? John says live generously. Think of others. The tax collectors—people who bought a franchise of tax payers from Rome then fleeced their own people with inflated tax bills—asked what should we do? John's answer is pretty direct. Don't cheat. Soldiers, used to using their force and authority to bilk powerless and vulnerable people out of money, asked what they should do. "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'" (Luke 3:14). Don't abuse people-with the

added insight to be content with your pay, putting his finger on the greed prompting these soldiers to bonus themselves on the backs of the powerless. Be content with your pay. By the way, you don't always get to decide what you get paid, but you do get to decide whether you are content with what you have. Don't cheat. Don't steal. Don't be greedy and selfish and small. I mean, this stuff is obvious, isn't it? But these are life-sized answers.

John gives life-sized answers to life-sized questions, and the people are impressed. People always want to know what to do. Tell me what to do. What should I do? If they are hungry enough, or desperate enough, or fearful enough, the mob will attach to anyone who is willing to tell them what to do. John's only telling them what they already know. But still they hang on every word: "The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah" (Luke 3:15). Here's a guy with life-sized answers to life-sized questions. John feels their anticipation, their hopeful eyes, and knows it's time to correct them. People always want to know what to do, but what they really need is to know who to be, and how to be transformed from the inside. There is only One I know to trust with a life and that's Jesus.

"John answered them all, 'I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire'" (Luke 3:16). Jesus comes not with a list of dos and don'ts. not with a suggested best practices PowerPoint, not with increased resolve to do better this year. See, the people had tried that. Again and again they wandered off, felt the pain of their disobedience, listened to a prophet and returned to the Lord. Again and again they tried to do better, resolved for healthy patterns. Maybe you've tried. I'm going to do better this year. I'm going to try harder this time. But where is the power for change? Where is the power for genuine inner transformation? Jesus doesn't come with a list—He comes with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The Holy Spirit is the power of God within you, at work in you, freeing you up more and more for a new way of life. "Fire." That's a transforming force. That's light and life right there. Fire can be painful. Refiner's fire. Refiners of precious metals apply a lot of heat to burn off impurities and yield pure gold or pure silver. John promises power in Christ to change your life, but he doesn't promise it will be pain-free.

A few years ago in Georgia I noticed a man stopping

in to pray in our sanctuary over lunch. I let him alone for two days, but on the third day I decided to stop in and sit with him. He looked up at me with tears in his eyes. "I've given my life to Jesus," he said. "And it's wonderful. I feel God's presence all the time. My heart is full. I love my wife and kids differently. I'm at peace deep inside like I've never known. The Bible is alive—it's like God is speaking directly to me every time I read. But," he said, "I'm torn up inside. I have this increasing feeling that I have to change my career." "Oh," I said, "what do you do?" He looked a little sheepish and said, "I own a few franchises of a sports-themed restaurant." He must have forgotten what he was wearing, because on his fleece jacket was a logo for a chain of restaurants that makes its money off of-how shall I say this?—exploiting the physical appearance of its waitresses. I glanced down at his chest, looked back up into his eyes, smiled a little and said, "Yeah, a change may be coming! But listen, no matter what happens you will always be richer in life for obeying the call of Christ." A few months later I drove by one of those restaurants and it had left the national chain and become its own thing. The point isn't the restaurant. The point is, Christ came to this man and changed his life. The Word of God came to this man and woke him up. He had felt the Lord saying: "Change this," and it was a big thing to change. And he did.

Jesus brings life-sized answers to life-sized guestions. In fact, Jesus is the life-sized answer. The presence of Jesus is life-changing light. The presence of Jesus is world-changing life. The presence of Jesus is an invitation to begin new life, a new way of life is here. It's okay. You can turn around now. God will help you. God will change you in your inner being. New life begins deep inside, then it flows out into changed behaviors and attitudes and habits. John Ortberg was in an interview lately and said we sometimes get people to think about Jesus by asking the question, "What would happen to you if you die tonight?" Pretty good question, for what it's worth. But John said, "A better question is to ask, 'What would happen to you if you don't die tonight? What will you do with your life the next day?' It is in the here and now Jesus offers full and eternal life." What if you die tonight? What if you don't? Eternal life starts right now if you are in Christ. Life-sized answer to a life-sized question. Are you ready for a new way of life?

## STUDY GUIDE LIGHT AND LIFE • NEW WAY OF LIFE Luke 3:4–18

Read the passage for the week: Luke 3:4-18.

- 1. Re-read Luke 3:9, then read Galatians 5:22-23. Is this the fruit John is talking about, or does he have something else in mind? What kind of fruit has been produced in your life lately?
- 2. Re-read Luke 3:10-11. John calls for the people to share their food and clothing with those who are struggling financially. Is this something you've done in the past? What was that experience like?
- 3. Re-read Luke 3:12-14. In your career, when have you been tempted to disregard these instructions?
- 4. John tells the soldiers to "be content with their pay." Is this challenging for you? How can you move towards being "content?"
- 5. Re-read Luke 3:16-18. Luke calls John's sermon "good news." In what way are these verses good news?
- 6. Patterns of life to which we have become accustomed may need to be set aside if we are to take up the way of life brought by Jesus. Is there anything that comes to mind that you may need to reconsider in light of Jesus's call in your life?
- 7. In the weeks ahead we will consider how Jesus brings a new way of life, a new way of living in this world. Consider whether there is anything in your life which you resist giving over to Jesus. Close your time by asking God to help you release your grip on these things.
- 8. Consider who God may be calling you to share Light and Life with this season. Last fall we selected a person to intentionally reach out to. Has there been any recent progress with this individual? Has someone new risen up in your life whom you feel a burden for?