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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

**“THE CRISIS MAN”**  
**Luke 3:1-20**

Jesus is a crisis man.

More than that, Jesus is *the* Crisis Man.

📖 We commonly use the word “crisis” as a synonym for *disaster* or *emergency*. Some experience the Lord’s coming that way. He came {Lk 2:34} **“to cause the falling and rising of many,”** and he still does. He came **“to be a sign that will be spoken against,”** and he still is.

There have always been and always will be people who fear and hate Jesus. Some openly declare war on him. Others call themselves Christians; yet if the Lord were to come knocking on their door today they would reject him, maybe even crucify him.

Jesus is *the* Crisis Man.

📖 That is not all. “Crisis” has another definition: it is a *decisive moment; a crucial situation; a turning point*. Christ’s First Advent 2,000 years ago divided history into Before Christ and Anno Domini. His Second Advent in the future will end history as we know it and inaugurate the Kingdom of God in all of its fullness.

Meanwhile, Christ keeps coming in Word and Spirit, calling us to believe, to receive, and to follow. In the end each of us must say “Yes” or “No” – and how we answer determines who and how and why we are now and forever.

Jesus is *the* Crisis Man.

□ It is not surprising, then, that his forerunner, John the Baptizer, was also a crisis man. Please turn to Luke 3:1-20.

■ Verse 1: **“In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Tracoonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene –”**

There were three calendar systems available to Luke. Depending on which one he is using, **“In the fifteenth year...”** falls sometime between October 1<sup>st</sup> AD 27 and mid-April AD 29.

But **“In the fifteenth year”** is not merely a date stamp: it depicts Israel’s dire political and economic situation. **“In the fifteenth year... when Pilate... Herod [Antipas]... [Herod] Philip... and Lysanias”** are in office. **“When”** Israel is trampled underfoot by pagan armies; ruled by greedy, power-hungry foreigners who are committed first to themselves, second to their Roman overlords, and only then (if at all) to the welfare of their subjects; and taxed to within an inch of her life by the overwhelming Roman Empire. **“When”** Israel is desperate for liberty, security and national significance.

■ Verse 2a: **“during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas.”** This is a snapshot of Israel’s degraded spiritual condition. By Law Israel has one high priest who serves until death. But now the Romans appoint and remove high priests at will, selecting those who will serve their interests. Annas had the job from 6-15 A.D. He was followed by his son

Eleazar for a few years, then in AD 18 by his son-in-law Caiaphas who has been in office ever since. Yet Annas continues to pull the strings behind the scenes, so Luke lists both of them as high priest.

Israel is in extreme political, economic, and spiritual crisis. Is the solution armed revolt *against* Rome, token compliance *with* Rome, active collaboration *with* Rome, or spiritual renewal *without regard* for Rome? This question is tearing apart communities and households. Many Jews are afraid that their nation will not survive the external pressure and internal division.

■ It is now, during this time of disaster, that, verses 2b-3, “**the word of God [comes] to**” a crisis man named “**John son of Zechariah**” out “**in the desert.**” He goes “**into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**”

■ John’s ministry fulfills “**the words of Isaiah the prophet:**” (verses 4-6 {NIV/NRSV})

**“A voice of one calling the desert,  
‘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.”**

When a king is going to tour his dominions, couriers go on ahead to announce his imminent arrival. Roads are improved. Eyesore properties are cleaned up. The people get themselves and their cities ready.

John is God’s courier, sent to prepare the way for the Messiah. He is concerned, not with roads and external beautification, but with hearts and lives.

So he urges his audience to “[fill] **in**” their valleys of degradation, despair and destitution. He exhorts them to “[make] **low**” their mountains of pride and self-sufficiency and wealth. He implores them to make “**straight**” their crooked thinking and crooked dealings, to “**smooth**” out the “**rough ways,**” their subtle immoralities, injustices, and idolatries that cause them and others to stumble.

? John’s message provokes a crisis for each of us: *will I “Prepare the way for the Lord,” or won’t I?*

■ If we are toying with the idea *not* to “**prepare the way,**” let us hear John’s strong warning in verses 7-9:

**“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 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.”**

Disregarding the crisis provoked by John’s inspired call to “**make straight paths for the Lord,**” triggers a different kind of crisis – the unequalled disaster and most extreme emergency of exposure to God’s wrath.

■ Knowing those consequences, who could fail to say “Yes”? Except that heeding this call is no casual matter. It requires conviction, commitment, and practical change, as John makes abundantly clear in verses 10-14.

When the crowd asks, “**What should we do then?**” John answers: “**Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.**” (Be generous. If you have more than you need, share with those who do not.) He tells tax collectors “**Don’t collect any more than you are required to.**” (Act justly and honestly.) And to soldiers he says, “**Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely – be content with your pay.**” (Do not oppress or abuse those under your power.)

■ Then, in verse 19, “**John [rebukes] Herod the tetrarch [Herod Antipas] because of his marriage to Herodias, his brother’s wife, and all the other evil things he [has] done.**” The call to “**Prepare the way for the Lord**” and “**make straight paths for him**” applies to the private behavior and public policies of both the poor and weak and the rich and powerful.

To be blunt, many Evangelicals don’t know what to do with John’s teaching. It sounds very much like what some label as Roman Catholic “Works Righteousness” or Liberal Protestant “Social Gospel.”

Let me make three points about this.

✈ 1<sup>st</sup>, John did not belong to either of those categories. He was a Messianic Jewish prophet sent by God to first century Palestine.

Consequently, his message was not given *to* us; yet it has been given *for* us. God’s word spoken through John

is still {Heb 4:12} “**alive and active... [judging our] thoughts and attitudes.**” {2 Ti 3:16-17} It is always “**useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God’s people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.**” No one here is at risk of refusing repentance because, quote, “**We have Abraham as our father**”; we *are* in danger of saying, “I have gone to church my whole life” or “I’m a good person.” We ignore John’s teaching at our own peril.

✈ 2<sup>nd</sup>, John’s counsel to share, not to cheat, and not to misuse power is all about producing “**fruit in keeping with repentance.**” Repentance is not mainly a *feeling* of regret for our sin; it is the threefold *act* of admitting that it is sin, asking God to forgive us, and actually doing what is right.

Theological conservatives fixate so intently on “personal” sins relating to sex, drugs and profanity that some even deny the reality of corporate sins involving power, economics, and violence. Liberals do the exact opposite. Both sides are wrong. The call to repentance targets immorality, injustice and idolatry with equal force. Pride and sexual iniquity are sins and we must repent of them. The same is true of brutality and injustice.

✈ 3<sup>rd</sup>, John’s call to repentance is Gospel, not law.

☑ {Tullian Tchividjian} “**Legalism says God will love us if we change.**” Licentiousness says that because God loves us we do not have to change. “**The gospel says God will change us because He loves us.**”

Repentance is part of that change. To be sure, {Eph 2:8-9} **“it is by grace [we] have been saved, through faith...not by works.”** But that isn’t all: {Eph 2:10} **“we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”** So while we are not saved *by* good works, we are saved *for* good works.

Repentance is one of those **“good works.”** It is God’s first great work within and through us. There is no conflict between the call to **“produce fruit in keeping with repentance”** and the invitation to be saved **“by grace...through faith.”**

Jesus is the crisis man. Two thousand years ago his First Advent caused **“the falling and rising of many.”** There have always been, and always will be people who fear and hate him.

His Second Advent in the future will end history as we know it and inaugurate the Kingdom of God in all of its fullness.

Until then Jesus keeps coming in Word and Spirit, calling us to believe, receive, and follow. Each of us must say “Yes” or “No,” and our answer determines who and how and why we are now and forever.

‡ The question is: *How are we responding to Jesus? What are we doing in the crisis he provokes?*