

# John the Baptist

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[ 0 : 00 ] I would like to take as my text this evening words in the gospel according to Mark. Mark chapter 1 and verses 2 to 5.

Mark chapter 1 verse 2. As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight. John did baptize in the wilderness and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. And there went out unto him all the land of Judea and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of them in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

I wish to look with you tonight for a short time at the ministry of John the Baptist. Mark prefaces what he has to say here about the ministry of the Baptist with two quotations taken from the Old Testament prophets.

[ 1 : 16 ] The first of them is taken from the prophecy of Malachi. Malachi chapter 3 verse 1. We have it in verse 2. Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

John the Baptist was the messenger sent before Christ, before his face, to prepare the way for his coming, to prepare the way for Messiah's coming.

He was sent before him. That's the force of before his face, before him in space and before him in time. He was Messiah's herald, Messiah's messenger, sent to prepare his way.

And then in verse 3, we have a quotation from that chapter which we read together this evening, Isaiah chapter 40. In fact, it's the third verse of that chapter 2.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight. In the context in Isaiah chapter 40, the primary application of those words is to the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after their long years of captivity in Babylon.

[ 2 : 39 ] Jehovah leads them through the wilderness. He leads them home through the wilderness. And before him goes the herald, crying, Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.

But I said that the words have, in the context in Isaiah, the primary application to the return of the Jews from Babylon.

But that is by no means their total fulfillment, nor indeed is it their principal application. Their principal application is to the preparatory work of John the Baptist.

He is the one who comes to prepare the way for Messiah's mission of mercy. The return of the Jews from Babylon to their own land is but typical of a far greater release of the people of God experience, their release from the bondage of sin.

John the Baptist then is Messiah's forerunner. The essential meaning of his ministry can be distilled into three words taken from this passage which we're looking at this evening.

[ 4 : 14 ] And the first of those words is wilderness. Wilderness. He is the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He cries in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.

It was through the Syrian desert that the people of Israel, the people of Judah, returned home from Babylon. The Lord Jehovah, their God, led them through the Syrian wilderness back to their own land.

And the herald, as it were, went before crying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make his path straight. That is, make his path level.

All obstructions must be removed. The tracks must be cleared in order that Jehovah's way might be unhindered. It was in the Judean wilderness that John the Baptist preached that is, the area between the hills of Judea on the west and the Dead Sea and the Lower Jordan on the east.

It is a barren, desolate region. It is a region of jagged rocks, of pebbles and of broken stones, an area of brushwood beneath which crawl many snakes, an unfruitful, barren, desolate area. [ 5 : 46 ] But in the final analysis, the wilderness through which a straight path has to be cut is the wilderness of the people's hearts.

The Syrian desert and the Judean wilderness are but typical of the human heart. John is here calling attention to the people's sin. He denounces their sin and he demands that they repent of it. In that way, preparation will be made for the Saviour's coming.

And that is how it must always be with the preacher of God's truth. The preacher is called to preach, first of all, the law and then the gospel.

I stand here tonight as a preacher of God's law and gospel. The preacher slays the people, first of all, with the law and then graciously and tenderly applies the healing balm of the gospel of Christ.

[ 6 : 55 ] You and I, my friends, in our natural state are in the wilderness. By nature, we're in the wilderness. We are sinful. We've been born sinful.

We've been born with a sinful nature. Each one of us possesses a sinful nature. We sang it tonight as we so often, we sang about it tonight as we so often do in the 51st Psalm, Behold, I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me.

The heart of man, the Bible says, is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Jesus tells us later on in this same gospel, in chapter 7, that it is out from the heart of man that proceed evil thoughts and murders and adulteries and jealousies and all these evil things.

They proceed from within. God made man perfect at the first, but man sinned. Adam disobeyed God and we have sinned in him.

He is the representative man. He is the federal head of the human race and all of us have sinned in him and fallen with him. We have inherited from him a sinful nature.

[ 8 : 12 ] Your thinking, my friend, is permeated by sin and so is mine. Your noblest thoughts and mine, our most altruistic thoughts, our kindest thoughts concerning other people, are tainted with sin.

Our understanding of biblical truth in our natural condition is limited. it is distorted. The understanding, you see, of biblical truth does not depend on native intelligence.

It's not a matter of intellectual capabilities. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus and Nicodemus was a very clever man.

We can be sure of that. He was a master in Israel, what we probably today would call a theological professor. And when Jesus said to him, you must be born again, Nicodemus did not understand at all.

Nicodemus thought that Jesus was talking about entering into his mother's womb a second time and being born. How can such things be, he said. He did not understand.

[ 9 : 21 ] The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God. They are foolishness to him. Neither can he understand them. For they are spiritually discerned.

We're in the wilderness. Your emotions have been affected by sin. You don't love God with all your heart as you ought. God is perfect. He is perfectly holy.

He is perfectly good. None is as deserving of our love as he. Yet we are rebels against him. We are in love with what is evil and we have a hatred of righteousness.

man is in darkness. Men love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil. We're in the wilderness.

Your will has been affected by sin. Even when you know what you ought to do, you find in yourself, don't you? We all do. An inability to do it. You may succeed very well in conforming outwardly outwardly to our Christian moral standard.

[ 10 : 27 ] But you know perfectly well that within is pride and selfishness and conceit and self-righteousness and impurity and a materialistic attitude.

And so on. We're in the wilderness. You've done what you should not have done but not only that, you have left undone what you should have done. You and I have not clothed the naked, fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, visited the sick and those in prison and befriended the strangers. We're in the wilderness. In the parallel passage to this in Luke's gospel, we are told that John mentioned the specific sins of which those who came to him for baptism were guilty.

He talked of those who were so selfish. They had two coats but they would not give one to the person who hadn't got a coat. They had plenty of food for themselves but they would not give food to those who were hungry.

There were those tax collectors who were so dishonest taking from the people more than they ought to have taken from them. There were those soldiers who were practicing violence who were falsely accusing others and who were not content with their wages.

[ 11 : 43 ] You and I are guilty of specific sins and we're guilty of those specific sins because of the sinful nature within. Those sins proceed from that nature.

If Christ, the Messiah, the Savior is to enter into our hearts and lives then the way must be cleared. The boulders must be removed.

Sin must be dealt with. Sin must be put away. For at present if you are unconverted you are in the wilderness.

Wilderness. That's the first word. And the second key word that we have here is repentance.

Repentance. Verse 4 says that John preached the baptism of repentance.

The baptism of repentance. Now baptism was by this time well known amongst the Jewish people. Proselyte baptism was common amongst them.

[ 12 : 46 ] When a Gentile wanted to enter in fully into the fellowship of the Jewish people to adopt the Jewish faith and be accepted as a fully fledged member of the Jewish synagogue of the Jewish community he did so by being baptized.

He became a proselyte by being baptized. That was common by this time but what was new in John's baptism and in John's preaching was this that he called upon not only Gentiles to be baptized he called upon Jews also to be baptized.

baptized. You see baptism was a sign a sign and a seal of repentance and that repentance was required not only of Gentile people it was required of the Jewish people also.

John called upon the people to repent. Repent that was the great burden of his message. This is how he was preparing the way for Messiah's coming by calling upon the people to repent of sin and to show that they had repented as a sign of their repentance to submit to his baptism.

He fulfilled the role of the preparer of the way the role of Messiah's forerunner by such preaching and baptizing.

[ 14 : 19 ] And we're told that the people flocked to him. There were thousands thousands who flocked to him. There were thousands who listened to him. Thousands who were baptized by him.

That's the only way we can understand verse 5. All the land of Judea all they of Jerusalem they were all baptized. Does this mean that there were thousands of them who had repented?

Well the four gospels do not indicate to us that a great revival had occurred. Jesus when he took up his ministry was opposed by so many.

There were thousands no doubt who were interested in his miracles but there certainly were not thousands who were wholeheartedly following him and who were loyally standing by him.

You see great crowds do not necessarily indicate a mighty working of the spirit of God. There have been great evangelistic campaigns in recent years in our own country with thousands of people going forward as they put it and I don't for one moment doubt but that a good number of those were converted I have no doubt at all about that but if all those thousands who went forward were converted to Christ we would be seeing the effect today in raising of the moral standards of the life of the nation and we just do not see that.

[ 15 : 55 ] It was not John's fault that expectations were not realized. He faithfully proclaimed the doctrine of repentance.

What is repentance? It is a radical change of mind of heart and of life. I have often in my preaching mentioned three of the essential characteristics three of the essential features of repentance and very briefly I want to mention them again this evening they are of tremendous importance there is first of all confession confession they were all baptized of them in the river Jordan confessing their sins the person who repents confesses his sins it is not a glib mechanical repentance repenting in some mechanical fashion simply saying lightly I am a sinner no no it's a repentance wrung out of a disturbing conviction of sin it's a person admitting that he's a sinner that he possesses a sinful nature that he has done wrong and that that is desperately serious it's a confession that he's been in rebellion against

God he goes into God's presence and there he confesses all begging forgiveness confession and then secondly contrition contrition there is sorrow there is grief there is the shedding of tears perhaps literal tears sometimes that is so but even if literal tears are not shed the heart weeps and the person who repents is in grief not just because of the consequences of his sin but because he's aware in some measure of the awful sinfulness and seriousness of his sin there's a hatred of sin there and then thirdly this first of all confession secondly contrition and thirdly conversion conversion there is a turning the person who repents makes an about turn previously he was going in one direction in the direction of sin he was content to take sin's way but now he's travelling in the opposite direction he walks away from his sin he shuns his sin he runs from his sin he abhors his sin he turns from it he is converted

I made reference a little while ago to the parallel passage to this in Luke's gospel and we're told there what John the Baptist said to those people who came to him for baptism he said to them exact no more than that which is appointed to you he was talking particularly there to the tax collectors he said he that hath two coats let him impart to him that hath none and he that hath meat to let him do likewise and the soldiers to the soldiers he said they demanded of him saying what shall we do he said do no violence do violence to no man neither accuse any falsely and be content with your wages there was you see this turning there had to be this turning away from sin this change in lifestyle and when a person repents there is always a change in his lifestyle if there is not that change of lifestyle there is no genuine repentance there this is how the way is prepared for the saviour is coming into a heart and into a life repentance is preached the individual repents you cannot have

Christ in the life and hold on to your sin receiving Christ necessarily involves a putting away of sin a turning from it that's a message that needs to be emphasised and reiterated in our day again and again and again my friend have you repented have you made this about turn have you been converted repentance wilderness repentance and the third key word is forgiveness forgiveness we have it in verse four in our authorised version the word is remission he preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins remission simply means forgiveness and we're told here that he preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins the word for there means with a view to this is why he preached that message the baptism of repentance repentance with a view to forgiveness forgiveness now let us be crystal clear about this it is not on the ground of your repentance that you are forgiven repentance is a necessary condition for receiving forgiveness but nobody is forgiven on the ground of his own repentance you don't receive

[ 21 : 33 ] God's forgiveness forgiveness because you repent if you were to say you did you would be teaching that repentance is a meritorious work you would be teaching a doctrine of forgiveness by works rather than by grace you receive repentance you receive forgiveness only on the ground of Christ's righteousness on the ground of his sacrifice at the cross of Calvary on the ground of his finished work he died for sinners he died as the sinner's substitute he paid sins penalty he answered the demands of God's moral law he satisfied the demands of divine justice and it is on no other ground that anyone can ever receive the forgiveness of sin only on the ground of Christ's finished work

John the Baptist recognized that when he pointed to Christ and he said to him behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world in calling him the Lamb of God he was indicating that he is the sacrificial Lamb slain for the sins of the people the word that is used for forgiveness here in our text in our authorized version is the word remission the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins and that word really means ascending away and it teaches us marvelously thrilling truth it recalls a number of Old Testament passages it recalls for example Leviticus chapter 16 where we're told of the ritual of the day the annual day of atonement you will recall how on that day there were two goats taken they constituted one sacrifice one goat was slain and the high priest went with the slain blood of that goat into the holy of holies and he sprinkled the blood there seven times before the mercy seat then he took the other goat the live goat the scapegoat and putting his hands on the head of the scapegoat he confessed over that goat all the sins of the people and the goat was taken and sent into a desolate place into a land not inhabited into the wilderness he was led there by the hand of a man a suitable man the people could see that goat disappearing further and further and further into the wilderness the goat became smaller and smaller the sin laden goat the goat laden with their sins until the goat was just a tiny speck on the horizon then it was gone gone forever the sin laden goat the man abandoned the goat and returned to the camp it was sent away

never to be seen again into a land not inhabited their sins were sent away they would never meet them again my friend if you have repented of sin and if you have come to rely upon Christ and upon his finished work alone then your sins have been sent away they will meet you no more they are yours no more you can never never be condemned then too there's that lovely verse which we so often sing in Psalm 103 thou hast removed our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west the east is as distant from the west as can be as far apart as can be east is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet if you have repented of your sin truly repented turn from it and have come to believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ you are at one extremity your sins are at the other and never never will there be a coming together isn't that marvelous