

John The Baptist
Isaiah 40:3-5, Matthew 3:1-17

Slide 1 - Introduction

Continuing from last week, the song, *Days of Elijah*, helps us understand the idea of renewal and how it is that God can move on us.

The imagery from this song is all Biblical, which is good, but unfortunately it also means that it's unfamiliar to many.

Today we're looking at the line, *"Still we are a voice in the desert crying 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord'."*

Now, there are two references in scripture on which this line is based; one is a prophecy, the other is the fulfilment.

The prophecy comes from Isaiah 40:3, *"A voice of one calling: 'In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"*

The fulfilment is found in the Gospels where Matthew 3 claims that John the Baptist was the fulfilment.

Matthew 3:3, *"This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: 'A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"*

In both, the idea is one of preparing the way for God, although in John the Baptist's case it becomes clear that it's Jesus for whom he's preparing the way.

But I guess what we really need to understand, if this is to be relevant to us, is what does it mean *"to prepare the way for the Lord?"*

Slide 2

We often pray that, when we talk to people about the Gospel, God will send his Holy Spirit ahead of us to prepare the way, so people are receptive to the message.

But what does it mean for us to prepare the way for God. He's everywhere, isn't He? After all, He's omnipresent.

Therefore, where can we go that God isn't already there. If He is already everywhere, why prepare the way for Him?

For John the Baptist, this wasn't a problem. He understood what his mission was. He understood that he wasn't just to prepare the way for Jesus, but to prepare the people for Jesus' mission.

Gabriel tells us that he was to do this by turning the people from their wickedness back to righteousness.

Luke 1:17, "And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Now, when John began his mission, he preached a message of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. This was a little strange as the Jews already had a method for finding forgiveness of their sins.

They just went to the temple and offered the prescribed sacrifices, after which their sins would be forgiven. But John said the way to forgiveness was through his baptism in water.

The word baptism literally means immersion. So, why was John offering forgiveness outside the temple system by just being immersed in water.

One reason to consider is that he was preparing the way for Jesus Who would offer forgiveness outside the temple system.

John's baptism of repentance paved the way for Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness, but there was another reason for John's Baptism.

It seems that there were problems with the sacrificial system, not so much in what it was but in the way it was being abused.

The original idea behind the sacrificial system was that when people realized they had sinned and were in violation of the law, they could get back into a right relationship with God by repenting and offering the correct sacrifice.

The sacrifice was a way of symbolically transferring their guilt and sins to an animal which was then killed in their place.

It could be viewed as an identification with the animal, so that the animal's death became your own death, a death to sin.

This pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus. However, while this may have been the ideal, problems arose as with all symbols.

People forgot what the symbols stood for and began thinking that it was the action itself that was important.

Thus, the sacrificial system became separated from the act of repentance. People thought they were okay with God if they just performed the correct sacrifices.

They came to believe that God didn't care whether they were sorry or whether they continued to commit the same sins over and over again as long as they performed the correct sacrifices.

John told the crowd that it didn't matter if they performed the right sacrifices, said the right prayers, or even participated in his baptism, if there was no repentance there was no forgiveness of sins.

Repentance is not only being sorry for sin but turning away from sin and doing it no more.

Slide 3

John's message also pointed out another flaw in their thinking. They were not only relying on performing actions to say they were okay, but they were relying on the fact that they were Jews.

They thought that they were okay since they were children of Abraham, and because of that it didn't matter how they lived their lives.

John told them that this was not acceptable to God, nor had it ever been. The Old Testament is one long list after another about the way some of the Jews had been acting and how God punished them for it.

John was telling them that they could only find acceptance by God if they turned to Him in repentance.

This also paved the way for Jesus' message which stated there was no Jew or Greek; in God's eye, everyone was the same.

Therefore, inclusion in the people of God was now on the basis of accepting Jesus rather than national identity.

In light of John's message, the people started asking John what they should do. The answers that John gave were not that surprising or innovative.

They weren't some startling, new way of gaining God's acceptance. Mostly, they were just common sense. Things that were obvious but which people needed to do.

To people that had possessions he said, *“Share with the poor.”* To the tax collectors he said, *“Be honest only collect the taxes that people owe,”* rather than charging extra and pocketing the difference.

To the soldiers he said, *“Be honest, don’t accuse people falsely or try to extort money from them.”*

None of these are ground shaking insights. He was telling people to live justly and do what was right.

But John’s baptism wasn’t a quick fix to get to heaven and then you could live how you liked, either.

John’s message wasn’t just an easy way to avoid changing your life or a cheaper alternative to buying a sacrifice. No, it required a change in behavior.

Jesus’ message was the same. He accepted everyone, even notorious sinners but His way was not the easy way out; His way required a change in lifestyle.

But Jesus told them that God would help them change.

Slide 4

So, we’ve seen how John prepared the way for Jesus, but what about us, how are we to prepare the way for Jesus.

There are at least two ways in which we can prepare the way for Jesus. First, we can hasten Jesus’ coming by bringing more and more people to Him.

2 Peter 3:9, *“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”*

Second, we can prepare people for Christ's coming to their lives. Now don't misunderstand me here. I know this is primarily the work of the Holy Spirit, but we also have a part to play in the process.

So, how are we to prepare people for the arrival of Jesus into their life. Well, essentially by preaching the same message that John the Baptist was given to preach.

The things that John said to prepare the way for the Lord are exactly the same things that we need to tell people to prepare them to receive Jesus into their lives.

We need to remember that John's message was mainly one of repentance.

It was about turning from sins and doing them no more. It was about a God Who accepts all no matter what they've done in the past, as long as they repent.

But it also requires us to be honest about the message. Too often Christianity is presented in a watered-down version that dilutes the point.

This wasn't the case for John. He emphasized the true nature of repentance. He wasn't interested in outward conformity or in the observances of rituals, he was interested in a change in lifestyle.

Sometimes, when people witness and present the Gospel, they end their testimony with, "*Now, just say this prayer with me and you'll be a Christian.*"

That's like observing the Jewish sacrifices without it meaning anything or going through the ritual of Baptism without the required repentance. Sometimes we make it seem too easy to become a Christian.

While some correctly see a welcoming God Who'll welcome them and give them a second chance to be what they were always intended to be, there are others who only see a cheap way into heaven.

They know what God's standard is. They know what it is that God requires, but they see Christianity as a loophole, a way to avoid the requirements of God.

They come to Christ and ask what's required, with the attitude that maybe this grace thing will have lower demands. You know, come to church and give your tithe and you'll be okay.

For extra credit and a couple of extra rooms in your mansion in heaven then you can optionally come to Bible Study or Evangelism training.

But under no circumstances does it require you to change the rest of your life or live the kind of life that God requires. It's the easy way out.

Like the ones who came to John the Baptist and asked what was required of them, expecting something like, sacrifice so many animals, or go through 2 or 3 ritual washings and baptisms and you'll be okay.

John's response was essentially, *"I'll tell you what you need to do, change your lifestyle, do what is right, meet God's requirements."*

The way some people present the Gospel you'd think that Jesus came to lower God's standard. That He came to lower the bar so anyone could jump over it. That the Old Testament set the standard too high.

But this wasn't the case. Jesus didn't come to lower the standard but rather He came to enable us to meet it.

Christianity isn't about avoiding the standard through Jesus, it's about Jesus enabling us to meet the standard.

Yes, we can be forgiven for the wrongs we've done, the sins we have committed, and we need to be.

But when it comes to the standards of God, it's not simply a matter of Jesus having done it, so we don't have to. It's a matter of what Jesus has done which enables us to meet the standard, not to avoid it.

Now, we're not going to be perfect. We'll make mistakes, errors, and sins and these can be forgiven but not seeing the need to live a righteous lifestyle, well that can't be forgiven.

Our unholy lifestyle must be repented of, which requires us to see that it's a requirement.

"To make clear the paths in the wilderness" means that we are to tell people what God's requirements are. If we're to prepare people to receive God, then we have to tell them how.

It means doing what John the Baptist did by calling people to repentance and doing it faithfully.

It doesn't mean giving them an easy option or trying to ease them into Christianity with such tactics like, *"just say you're sorry and pray this prayer,"* without making clear the requirements of a change in lifestyle.

This is tricky to get right. It's the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin; it's not up to us to tell people in what order God's going to deal with their problems and sins.

You can complain and moan all you like about some particular aspect of someone's behavior, yet when God lays His finger on that issue in a person's life, things suddenly start to happen.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not out for a judgmental Christianity where we constantly criticize each other and point out all the flaws while ignoring our own.

Rather I'm talking about making the requirements of Christianity clear. It's about a change of lifestyle, it's not a quick fix. It's about living a righteous life. We need to make this clear when we present the Gospel.

This is why, in order to prepare the way of the Lord, we need to live proper Christian lives, so people can see Christ in us and see in us what it means to be a Christian.

Slide 5

Conclusion

If we're to see the Church revived and God's Kingdom to grow, then we need to follow the example of John the Baptist.

The message that we present can't be a diluted one. We need to make it clear that to be a Christian is to follow Christ and be righteous.

God enables, yes, but unless there's a willingness on our part to change and be the kind of person God wants us to be then we're not a Christian no matter how many times we come to church, or how many prayers we've prayed, or how much we say we're sorry.

It's not about saying we're sorry, it's about changing our life with God's help.