

Voice in the Wilderness

by Carl Armerding

The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance and preparing the way of the Lord, and highlights the power of the word of God to bring salvation and eternal life.

Duration: 23:50

Scripture: Genesis 6:12, Isaiah 40:3-8, Matthew 6:33

Topics: "Repentance", "Evangelism"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on Isaiah 40:3-8, which speaks about preparing the way for the Lord. He emphasizes that sin is the root cause of all ruin and devastation in the world. The preacher highlights the role of John the Baptist as the Lord's messenger in announcing the coming of Jesus and calls upon the audience to also be ambassadors for Christ in their generation. The sermon concludes with a plea for prayer that the Lord would raise up individuals to call people to repentance and a living faith in God.

Transcript

Will you please turn in your Bibles to the 40th chapter of the book of Isaiah? And this time we'll take a look at verses 3 to 8. Isaiah 40, verses 3 to 8. Let me read them for you. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.

And the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

And the voice said, Cry, and he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is as grass, and all the goodliness thereof is the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it. Surely the people is grass, the grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever.

Some years ago, at the conclusion of a classroom lecture, a group of students, all of them women, came to my desk with a rather unusual question. By way of introduction, one of them, speaking for the rest, said that two of their number were married, and the others are about to be married. They had come because they wanted to know if I thought it right to bring children into the world in times like these.

I might add here that all of these young women were Christians, desiring to know and to do the will of God. Their concern was entirely for the children that might be born at a time when wars and rumors of wars torment the world on every hand. By way of reply, I reminded them that first of all of the story of Moses.

He was born at a time when the threat of death by drowning faced every male who came into the world. But that did not deter his parents, Samram and Jacobid, from having a family. The time of the promise had drawn near which God had sworn to Abram.

The people of Israel had greatly increased in number till another king arose which knew not Joseph. And he dealt subtly with the children of Israel, so that they cast out their young children till the end they might not live. In which time Moses was born and was exceeding Pharaoh.

Act 7. By faith he was hid three months of his parents because he saw he was a proper child, and they were not afraid of the king's commandment. And when he was cast out, Pharaoh's daughter took him up and nourished him for her own son. And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was mighty in words and deeds.

The rest of that story is too well known to require any repetition. But as we reflect upon it, we realize what a profound impression he made upon the world. What if he had never been born? I also reminded them of the story of Elijah who came into the world when it looked as though everybody had gone into idolatry.

Things had become so bad by the time that he began to prophesy that he thought he was the only one left who had not turned against the true and living God. It was only by direct communication from the Lord himself that he knew there were seven thousand in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal nor kissed his image. No doubt his own parents were among that number.

Or they would not have named their son Elijah, which means, My God is Jehovah. In so doing, they made crystal clear on whose side they stood. Had they been affected by circumstances, they might have said, What's the use of bringing a child into the world in a time like this? Evidently they were not looking at circumstances but to the living God.

And as a reward, the Lord gave them a son whose name was also brought down in history as one of the truly great. Centuries later there was another couple who had been praying that the Lord would bless their home with a child. The answer to that prayer was delayed until, humanly speaking, there was no hope that their request would ever be granted.

As a matter of fact, they may even have thought that he who was all-wise had denied their request because of the spiritual darkness that prevailed on every hand in those days. But one day when Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, was offering up incense in the temple, he got the surprise of his life when there appeared unto him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense, who told him that his prayer had been heard and that his wife Elizabeth would bear him a son whom they were to call John. And not only the parents, but many were to rejoice at his birth.

It is of this child that our present scripture lessens speech, that this is so is proven by the fact that it is applied to him in all four of the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Indeed, in the Gospel of John the Baptist actually applies it to himself. And yet seven centuries have rolled by since it was first uttered by the prophet Isaiah.

Such is the Holy Spirit's way of introducing the man who was to be known as the greatest prophet ever born. Yes, our Lord said he was more than a prophet. He was called the prophet of the highest because he was to go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

The field in which he was to work seems to be out of all keeping with such a glorious mission. He was to be a voice crying in the wilderness and saying, Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

One can hardly imagine a less attractive mission field than that which is here described as a wilderness and a desert. One is inclined to believe that these words are descriptive of the spiritual state as well as the physical state of the field to which he was assigned. In their spiritual sense they could be used to describe any mission field in the world.

But one does not have to go to the regions beyond to find a spiritual wilderness. Wherever sin has done its deadly work, there we find a wilderness and a desert. The behavior of many is so depraved that they cannot have a good time unless they have a wild time.

And all the brutality, murder, war, and bloodshed of which we hear and see so much today is turning many a fruitful land into barrenness for the wickedness of them that dwell therein. What a contrast to the fair scene into which the Lord put man at the beginning. And man has no one to blame but himself for the awful change.

By one man sinned and entered into the world, and death by sin. And so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. Such is the ruin which man has brought on himself.

Men have tried in various ways to explain as well as to excuse all of this. Quite recently a professor from one of our great universities came to Chicago to tell us that sin is just a psychological abnormality. By using ten syllables instead of one he merely complicated matters.

How much simpler and more effective to recognize sin as sin, the root cause of all the ruin and devastation which we see on every hand. But blessed be God, he does not leave sinful man to his fate. In his day John the Baptist was the Lord's messenger calling upon men to prepare the way of the Lord and to make in the desert a highway for our God.

And while it is true that John the Baptist had a special mission in thus announcing the coming of the Lord Jesus, there is a sense in which we too may take up the cry as ambassadors for Christ, calling upon our own generation to prepare the way for him to enter in. And though not all of us can go in person to the dark corners of the earth, we may have a share in helping to prepare and equip others to go. On a recent trip to Europe I got fresh visions of the need of places which once enjoyed the full light of the gospel as in the days of the Reformation, but which now lie under a cloud of moral and spiritual darkness is really appalling.

All of this makes one long and pray that the Lord will raise up someone like John the Baptist to call the people to repentance and to a living faith in the living God. And thus the word would be fulfilled again, that every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. No doubt these words speak of something more than physical changes.

I believe that they are really illustrations of the great spiritual changes which he stands ready to make as soon as we prepare the way for him to work. He does not ask us to make these changes. He alone can make them.

He alone can lift up those whom sin has brought low. He will also humble those who have lifted themselves up with pride. And that which you and I could never straighten out, He will make straight.

And that which is rough, He will make plain or smooth again. There are not many who can honestly claim that they have always gone straight. We doubt if there is anyone who could honestly say that.

Neither are there any who can say that the going has always been smooth. But how good to know that there is one who can take these lives of ours and straighten them out. And when the going is rough, He can make all things plain.

Surely that's a comforting thought. But it is up to us to prepare the way for him to do this. If it be asked how we prepare the way for him to do these wonderful things, we need only to turn to the ministry of John the Baptist and listen to him as he cries, Repent ye.

It is by repentance that we prepare the way for the Lord to work. But what do we mean by repent? In answer to that question, let me give you a definition which was given me many years ago. That repentance means taking sides with God against yourself.

In other words, repentance is something more than sorrow for sin or for the consequences of sin. The publican who said, God be merciful to me, a sinner, actually did more than one who merely confesses his sins. He owned that he was responsible for his sins.

Thus he prepared the way for the Lord to justify him. For everyone that exalted themselves shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Now compare that with verse 4 of our scripture lesson, see how well it fits.

It's quite possible that some who have never taken sides with God against themselves will wonder about it. If so, you've never prepared the way for him to work in your life. And therefore you've missed the greatest spiritual blessing which a gracious God stands ready to bestow upon you.

The low places of spiritual poverty which you've tried so hard to bring up to the level of true prosperity keep getting deeper and deeper. But the Lord alone is able to raise the poor out of the dust and to lift the beggar from the dunghill, that he may set him among princes and make him inherit the throne of glory. At the same time he prevents pride, for every mountain and hill should be made low.

And he that does that so that we may be marked by true humility, the rarest of graces. How often we try to excuse our pride, our crookedness, and our roughness by saying, well, you have to take me as I am, I was born this way. The last part of that statement is true.

But even though I was born in sin, I do not have to stay in sin. By the miracle of regeneration, that is, being born again, he makes us partakers of the divine nature. And therein lies the secret of true greatness and true nobility.

One who is born again can say with a psalmist, Thy gentleness hath made me great. There is refinement and culture there that is not of this world. It is the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

What is the purpose of all this? That question is answered in verse 5 of our text. It is that the glory of the Lord may be revealed, and that all flesh may see it together. There is no doubt that the transformation of our lives, as here illustrated, will bring great blessing to ourselves.

But that is not the point here. It is first of all that His glory may be revealed in us, and then that others may see it also. All flesh shall see it together.

And very often the transformed life of a child of God speaks more powerfully than any sermon he might preach. And best of all, it is confirmed by the word of God. The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

That makes it sure and steadfast. Such then was to be the mission of John the Baptist, and such in effect is our mission also as we go forth to herald Him and to preach His word. But what may we expect as a result? Before we try to answer that question, let us hear what the Lord has to say about man at his best.

We should note in passing that the first reference to all flesh, which we find in the Bible, stands out in contrast to this. There we read that all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. Genesis 6 and verse 12.

It is for that reason that the Lord brought the flood upon the earth. But in the passage now before us, all flesh is likened to grass, and the goodness thereof is the flower of the field. There is nothing very flattering about that.

There are places in the Bible where man is likened to a stately tree or to a majestic mountain, but to be likened to withering grass or to a wild flower is humbling indeed. The life of a flower is very brief at best. The length of its life is generally but a fragment of the life of the plant on which it grows.

In some cases a flower lasts but a few hours, even though it may have taken months or even years to produce it. Such is the illustration of man at his best. The grass withereth, the flower faded, and that not only because of the nature of the plant, but because the Spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it.

Now that does not sound at all like the work of the Spirit, does it? We generally think of him as the one who gives life. But here we learn that the breath of the Spirit can wither as well as give life. It all depends on what his purpose is.

Before we learn that that which is born of the Spirit is spirit, we have to learn that that which is born of the flesh is flesh. Men have worked long and hard to increase the span of life, but they are still far from attaining the age of Methuselah. Real life is something more than length of days.

Eternal life is something more than an endless extension of our existence. And the same Spirit which here blows upon the grass to hasten its end, as it were, is the one who generates within the true believer the life which is eternal. And that he does by the incorruptible seed of the living Word of God.

For we are born again, not of corruptible seed, but of the incorruptible, by the Word of God which liveth and abideth forever. And it is immediately after saying that that Peter quotes the very scripture which we are studying. And he concludes by saying, And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you.

With these verses before us, we can have no doubt that the Holy Spirit intended us to find a message for the present in the prophecy of Isaiah. Therefore it is important when dealing with the unsaved to give them the living Word of God. In so doing, we shall give them something which the Holy Spirit can use to bring

about that marvelous miracle which we call the new birth.

Nothing else, no matter how powerful, can bring this about. There is living power in the Word of God which is available for the blessing of man, and not for his destruction as is so much of the power that man has been able to develop in these last days. The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.

And that salvation includes more than just the salvation of one's soul. It includes our present deliverance from the power of sin, as well as our future deliverance from its presence. And then the body itself shall be changed, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.

Then, too, the same word by which we live or were made alive is to be our spiritual meat as well. Therefore we should let nothing prevent us from feasting upon it regularly. We may not understand all that we read, neither did the Ethiopian eunuch of whom we read in Acts 8, but that did not hinder him from reading, and in due course the Lord sent him one who could guide him.

That's exactly what the Spirit of God has come to do for you and for me. Some of us have never had the privilege of attending a Bible institute or a seminary. On the other hand, many of us were born in Christian homes where we heard the word of God read every day in family worship.

And where that is the case, one generally has the opportunity to see it lived out before him as well. Such was my blessed experience, and for that inestimable boon I am devoutly thankful to God every day. My saintly parents did not have much formal education.

They had very little of this world's goods, but they were rich in faith, and they brought up their ten children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And I happened to be the oldest of those ten. There were seven boys and three girls.

Parents and some of us in heaven already, and thank God the rest of us, by grace, now on the road to the same. And so it is so that I would attribute my simple childlike faith in the precious word of God to what I heard and saw lived out before me every day of my life as a boy. I wonder if I might just address myself particularly now to some parents who perhaps have been discouraged.

They haven't seen the effect of all their teaching in the lives of their children. You've wondered just about what you could expect. But remember that God in this same prophecy of Isaiah has said that his word shall not return unto him void, that is, it won't come back empty, but it shall accomplish that whereto he has sent it.

And so we can count on God to bless the seed. It may interest you to know that in some of the old ruins back in the Middle East, seeds have been discovered that doubtless were put there in the days, say, three or three thousand five hundred years ago. And the amazing thing was that the germ of life in those seeds was still air.

And when they were planted, they actually sprouted and grew. So the word of God, which is indestructible, it's incorruptible, the word by which we're born again. Now I remind you again that the scripture which we're studying here is referred to by Peter in his first epistle, so that it's really relevant, it belongs to the day in which we live.

We can turn to it with assurance and say, I know that this is a message for my time, for right now, and you and I can count on this precious seed as we sow it in the hearts of our children and our grandchildren. I say this with deep feeling, because in the providence of God, the Lord gave us children, and I now have sixteen grandchildren. And how wonderful to know that we can count on the Lord to use the seed of His word to give to them eternal life.

I remember my dear old father praying for us children, and after they were all converted, after the ten were converted, I said to him one day, I said, Dad, but the children are all, we children are all saved now. You don't need to pray that prayer anymore. Yes, he said, but what about my grandchildren? He said, they're my house also.

And he was taking the Lord at His word, who said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And so after his grandchildren began confessing the Lord, he was still praying this prayer. I knew better than to ask him about it this time, because I knew what his answer would be.

He said, Even my great-grandchildren are part of my house. So there is a world of comfort in this, my friends, in knowing that we have in the Bible that which is tried and tested and absolutely reliable. In the trackless wilderness in which we walk and live, it is our guide.

In the desert, it is our trusted companion. Whether the path of life move up or down, whether it go from side to side or straight ahead, whether it be rough or plain, in God's precious word, we shall find all that is needed to guide us safely to our heavenly home. May the Lord bless to us this meditation in His holy word.

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