

MAKE STRAIGHT THE LORD'S WAY

Isaiah 40:3-5 and John 1:22-23 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

(A Message Doubling Back to Look Carefully at Making the Lord's Way Straight)

What's in a highway? Most of us know that Interstate 80 runs through Rock Springs, Wyoming, and this highway is the most well-traveled road across America from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. The quintessential proof of civilization is the presence of roads. Roads joined together open the door to trade, travel, vacation spots, fishing holes, hunting spots to harvest game, a path for military equipment to move for our protection, a path to education, recreation, communication, commerce, and roads are the sign that there is a way for people to get to where they need to go. Have you ever been on a road, and swiftly driven past a sign, and realized either you missed your turn, or you missed reading the message on the sign, so you found a place to turn around, and double back to either get on the right road, or to read the essential message you missed reading. After reading the message, has it ever made a big difference in your plans for that day?

This week I read in my devotions, Leviticus 20:8 which says, "Keep My statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctifies you." On this journey of my life, I have doubled back over and over as God has captured my attention, and He has found ways to get my attention and He has helped me get off wrong byways, when I've missed a turn. God has helped me to stay on His highway of holiness—Isaiah 35:8. As I began meditating on John 1:29-34 this past week, God kept bringing me back over and over, and urging me to take a deeper look at the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist about making His way straight. So, today, this message I am bringing to us all, is without apology, a double-back, a take a deeper look message, looking at what it means to prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway for our God-Isaiah 40:3, and in Isaiah 40:4, to realize making His way straight includes making the crooked places straight. If we will allow God to take us back today, let's go down, via God's Word, into the wilderness, down to the Jordan River, I believe God wants us to go down to the river, and hear the Word of the Lord designed for each of us too from John the Baptist. If we each will listen to the message, "Make straight the Lord's Way," I believe none of us will get away from the river without repenting. The message of John the Baptist won't allow any of us to listen for others, but only for ourselves.

Jesus did not come with a different message from John. Yes, Jesus would go much farther than preaching repentance, but for Jesus, He shared the same repentance message with John the Baptist, and Jesus forever made repentance the road base, the foundation of the Gospel of receiving Him by grace through faith. Amazingly, the Gospel of Mark clearly connects the dots of John the Baptist, as Jesus' forerunner, and Jesus as the Way to the Father. We read in Mark 1:14-15, "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." This voice of Isaiah, fulfilled in John the Baptist was a cry to make a highway to our own repentance when Jesus arrives, and Jesus has come.

It is refreshing to note that Jesus' forerunner refused to confirm his hearers and followers in their sin, or to permit them to evade responsibility for sin in their lives. Rather, this preparation for Messiah message was for all his hearers to make the path straight for each of them to come to Jesus Messiah. John confronted the multitudes, including the Jewish leaders in their sin, and he called them to repentance. The preacher whose message is "Repent," has pledged his head to heaven for the Gospel. That is what John the Baptist did. I praise God for the joy and the responsibility of preaching Christ's Gospel that includes repentance. I must not, and I will not water down or dilute the Gospel that John the Baptist and Jesus Himself preached. Let's explore today what it means to make straight in the desert a highway for our God, and to make straight in the desert a highway to our God. Here are five strong meanings of the Hebrew and Greek words that are necessary for sinners to come to Jesus and are necessary for believers to live lives of repentance step by step and step in step with Jesus. What does it mean, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God!"? First of all,

MAKING STRAIGHT THE LORD'S WAY MEANS WE EACH MUST RECEIVE FOR OURSELVES JESUS' CALL TO REPENTANCE. (I.) We

read Isaiah's words in Isaiah 40:3, "A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God." The Hebrew word for make straight is **yashar**. This word means make ready, pleasing, good, right, pleasant, prosperous, upright, even, and straight. **Straight is the opposite of proud.** Straight means humble and repentant. The prophet Habakkuk in Habakkuk 2:4 speaks of every proud soul saying, "Behold, his soul is puffed up; it is not **yashar**/upright within him, but the just shall live by his faith." This message of John has a deep urgency in it. Notice in Isaiah 40:1-6 that the word cry or cries out appears 4 times, once in Isaiah 4:2 and 3, and twice in verse 6. To cry out to God's people or to the lost is far more than casual speaking. This message carries deep urgency, as Isaiah's voice, by God's command, increased in volume and intensity.

Let me illustrate what straight means through the life of a mighty Scottish Presbyterian, Clarence Edward Noble Macartney, the last of seven children. In 1924, Pastor Clarence who grew up in Scotland was named the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. He wrote 57 books, and to those who denied the authority of the Word of God, he thundered, "A deleted Bible results in a diluted Gospel." He is best known for his well-known evangelistic sermon, "Come before Winter," taken from II Timothy 4: 21, and it was first preached in Philadelphia on October 18, 1915. His message was straight to the heart, emphasizing the need to receive Christ now, not later. He preached, "The Holy Spirit, when He invites men to come to Christ, never says, 'Tomorrow,' but always, 'Today!'" If you can find me one place in the Bible where the Holy Spirit says, "Believe in Christ tomorrow," or "Repent and be saved tomorrow," I will come out of the pulpit and stay out of it—for I would have no Gospel to preach." Matthew Henry in 1712, wrote about making ready with repentance, saying, "Prepare yourselves for Him, remove everything that is an obstruction to His entrance. Make room for Christ. If He's prepared the end for us, (and He has) we ought surely to prepare the way for Him. Prepare for the Savior." Secondly,

MAKING STRAIGHT THE LORD’S WAY MEANS WE MUST REMOVE EVERY OBSTACLE IN OUR HEART THAT RESISTS REPENTANCE. (II)

How do we do this? Isaiah and John the Baptist both set before us a way to remove all obstacles and all our resistance to repentance. Isaiah said in Isaiah 40:4, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places plain.” We must level the mountains of human pride in Messiah’s way to our hearts. We must level the highway to our heart for Jesus. We all at times raise obstacles, valleys of low and base sins we resist confessing and forsaking, mountains of pride, crooked and stubborn hearts, stiff-necked stubbornness. Sin tries to blockade the Lord out of our heart. Sometimes we isolate ourselves in steep valleys of sin or in box canyons of addiction—so that we desperately need Messiah Jesus’ chain breaking of our sins. Our anxieties can become addictions. Unpredictable anger can erupt from our lips. Biting sarcasm can entrap us in cages of bitterness. Deep caves of grudges can hold us tightly in an ironlike grip. Some grudges are so deep they won’t leave until we seek revenge. Some of us today may be held in the dark world of internet pornography. Some of us have a long chain on, and we are fighting an inner battle with a skeleton in our closet that is rattling louder and louder.

Have you acknowledged your despair and cried out in your wilderness for God to set you free? God will hear your cry. The Holy Spirit lays the groundwork, by His Word. He wants to break up our stony ground by repentance and break us from our sinful past and sinful habits. Repentance is needed, but like surgery, it is extremely painful. It is difficult to break from past behavior that is still enticing, pleasing, and self-satisfying to us. Freedom from sin, shame, and slavery is joyous, but clearing the way by tears, repentance, confession of our sins to each other, and praying is as big a job as trying to level mountains or fill in valleys. True repentance is giving up sin that is inseparably intertwined in our life. God wants to have a deeper walk with us, a deeper work in our lives. In repentance, we must lay our sins on Jesus, asking Him to remove them from our lives, turning to Him and Him alone. He will clear the highway to our heart, and establish His rule and reign there. Thirdly,

MAKING STRAIGHT THE LORD’S WAY MEANS WE WANT TO CEASE STUMBLING IN THE SAME PLACES AND IN THE SAME WAYS. (III.)

Notice again the word way or highway in Isaiah and John the Baptist’s words. We read in Isaiah 40:3, “In the wilderness prepare **the way** of the Lord; make straight in the desert, **a highway** for our God.” To make straight the way means we are preventing any cause of stumbling. The Hebrew word for the way or the road is **derek** which means a road well-traveled, or a lifestyle or walk that is pleasing to God. The Hebrew word highway is **mesilaw**, which means to mound up a turnpike or a thoroughfare that doesn’t have ruts, potholes, or washouts. About 150 years ago, many preachers began speaking of revivals which often could run in churches for two weeks or more. Nevertheless, John the Baptist, following Isaiah was drawing up not a series of meetings in church, but a daily roadmap for revival. How can we live in a spirit of revival, so we aren’t stumbling over and over in the same potholes, and getting high-centered in washouts? What is on this roadmap?

Some things in our lives will have to be lifted up! Isaiah 40:3 says every valley must be lifted up.” What’s a valley? It could be a low place, a crevice, a gutter. Revival is refusing to allow places in our lives that are lacking with God, low spots in our walk with the Lord to become hollowed out, and deeper and deeper. Making straight the way to repentance before the Lord Jesus means these places must be filled in before revival can come. Perhaps we are living in deep debt, or we have deep marital issues, or we have let physical health or recreational or school activities pull us away from God. Have you identified the low places? Does it matter to you? It matters to God. Will we repent and fill in the low places?

Some things in our lives will have to be brought way down to level ground!

Isaiah 40:3 says, “And every mountain and hill be made low.” What’s a mountain or a hill in our lives? It is something standing taller than the rest of the landscape, something that is a barrier or a hindrance to a straight and level road. These uplifted hills and mountains for me and you may include pride, grudges, jealousy, hypocrisy, disobedience to God’s will, fear, unforgiveness, lust, unfaithfulness. There are so many mountains that get in the way of a straight highway for our God to walk with us. What are these attitudes, actions, and passions in our lives that must come down if God is going to move as we see repentance bring revival?

Some things, outside God’s plumbline, are crooked and need straightened!

Luke 3: 5 quotes John the Baptist as saying, “And the crooked shall become straight.” Isaiah 40: 3, says “the uneven ground shall become level.” The word crooked means deceptive, sly, manipulative, slippery, and on a road, hairpin curves are not a straight road at all. These things in our lives that we have agreed to are hazardous to our health and spiritual health. Where are these places in the road of our lives? Have we refused to bow to the Lordship of Christ and turned a deaf ear to His call? Have we refused to submit to God and to each other in the fear of God, as He commands us in Eph. 5:21? Have we allowed recreation or work or health or hobbies to lead us away from God? Have we got off on the byway of self-righteousness believing it our job to know what’s right for everyone else around us, while we have abandoned love and meekness for zeroing in on other’s failures while justifying almost everything we do as good and godly? Do you remember the lawyer in Luke 10:29 that seeking to justify himself before Jesus, asked Him, “And who is my neighbor?” He learned as Jesus told him of the good Samaritan. Take this test. When you are confronted by God, your brother, your spouse, or anyone about something less than stellar in your life, do you quickly repent, or like the lawyer, do you seek to justify yourself? If you do, the crooked is still not straight.

Some things, rough around the edges, will have to graded off into a plain,

Isaiah 40:3 says, “And the rough places a plain.” Washboard Christian walks make the road to revival with Jesus virtually impassable. These are questionable words and actions. I Thess. 5:22 tells us to “shun or abstain from every form of evil.” Here is slander, gossip, envy, anger, meddling, hatred, prayerlessness, a bad temper, bitterness, marital “gotcha’s” by bringing up the past, opposing leadership, impure thoughts and motives, and labeling. We as Christians can speak of each other with demeaning, hidden prejudice, and inner bitterness, “He’s nothing but a spuing volcano, she’s pure strychnine, his elevator doesn’t make it to second floor,

I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw a ten-foot pole, or watch out, she wears the pants in their house." Are we resisting repentance and revival? Listen to John the Baptist at the Jordan. Are we really hearing his message and repenting?

MAKING STRAIGHT THE LORD'S WAY MEANS US, NOT OTHERS.

When repentance is mentioned, God looks at me and you, but He doesn't call us to look at others. Notice with me Luke 3:10-14 and Matthew 3:7-10. Yes, there is a proper place for confronting a brother or sister who is living in sin, but the motive as Galatians 6: 1-5 states is always repentance, reconciling, and remembering our own predisposition to sin as well. When we want to make another person suffer, God is not pleased. Did you read Our Daily Bread for this Friday? It was God's Word of warning to Edom or the Esau-ites in Obadiah 1:12, which is God's command, "You should not gloat over your brother in the day of his misfortune." We parents won't allow our children to gloat when their sister or brother is in trouble and needs discipline. But would we as their examples say about a brother or sister in Jesus, "Well they are getting their "comeuppance." Isaiah and John the Baptist are aiming the "make straight" at us, not showing us other's faults. Fifthly,

MAKING STRAIGHT THE LORD'S WAY MEANS MAKE AGREEMENT, CONCORD, AND HARMONY WITH EACH OTHER.

Notice that the phrase in Isaiah 40:4, ESV saying, "the uneven ground shall become level," is translated in the KJV as the crooked shall be made straight. The Hebrew word for crooked or uneven is **awkobe** which means what is swelled up or out, or that which is tripping us up at the heels. **Awkobe** also can mean fraudulent, deceitful, or polluted. But what does repentance bring when we make straight the way of the Lord? Here it says the crooked shall become straight." When John spoke in Greek, his word for crooked in Luke 3:5 was **skolios**. It means warped, morally crooked or perverse. It is the root for our word scoliosis. Beloved, all of us can suffer at times with a crooked spiritual spine. The crooked place or road is the place of deceit, which is almost always, the human heart. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, "The heart is deceitful or crooked above all things and desperately wicked; who can know it?" The greatest speaker on revival I have ever heard was Richard Owen Roberts. His words are true. "There can be no salvation apart from repentance." Now what does God want to do to make us straight in our crooked, deceitful parts and places, in our hearts?

The Hebrew word for straight in Isaiah 40:4, is not **yashar**, our original word for make ready, right, upright, forthright or pleasing to God. This Hebrew word for straight is **meeshore**. It is a form of **yashar** that means harmony or agreement between persons. What brings harmony and straightness with God. Proverbs 3:6 declares, "In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make straight your ways." Louis Evans, the former pastor of Hollywood Presbyterian Church said something that I don't believe is only for couples, but it can work for each of us brothers and sisters in God's forever family. He said, "I've never known a couple who went ahead with a divorce after first praying together, on their knees, every day, for a week." Praying together is not only a repentant solvent but a revival glue. It binds our hearts together anew in joyous harmony, so that Isaiah 40:5 comes true, and "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." Dr. Paul Tournier wrote,

“It is only when a husband and wife pray together before God that they find the secret of true harmony, that the difference in their temperaments, their ideas, and their tastes enriches their home instead of endangering it. When each of the marriage partners seeks quietly before God to see his or her own faults, recognizes his or her own sin, and asks the forgiveness of the other, marital problems are no more...They learn to become absolutely honest with each other...this is the price to be paid if partners very different from each other are to combine their gifts, instead of setting them against each other.” Beloved, if praying together can restore a marriage about to break up, think of what it can do to strengthen and enrich a solid marriage that is still lacking in communication or in intimacy. David Branon has put it in a sentence, “Couples who pray together, stay together.” I want to close with this prayer of making straight the way of the Lord, by claiming “meeshore” this straightness only God can give – God’s harmony in all our relationships in our precious church. My sense from the Holy Spirit is to proclaim in our 2022 wilderness, the cry God has placed on my heart, and my voice joins in with John the Baptist as I conclude, “The church that prays together, stays together.” God make it so in our Rock Springs Evangelical Free Church. In Jesus Name Amen.