

## **The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness**

Call to Worship: Psalm 67

1st Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11

2nd Scripture: Matthew 3:1-3

Hymn #218- *All Hail The Power of Jesus' Name*

Hymn #129- *Fairest Lord Jesus*

Hymn #105- *Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah*

### **Introduction**

Having worked through everything that Matthew has given us concerning the birth and early life of Christ, we now fast forward to the last three and a half years of our Lord's life, which consists of His public ministry, death and resurrection. And so, the remaining 26 chapters bring us through those final years.

Two weeks ago, at the evening service, we considered Luke's brief summary address, concerning all that we need to know about the early life of Christ, found in Luke 2:39-52. If you were not here in the evening and would like to hear that message, it can be found at [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com), under the title, "The Early Life of Christ" (Note: via GRBC website also).

And so, this morning then, we move toward the beginning of our Lord's public ministry, which brings us to the ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of our Lord. And once again, in consideration of this forerunner, Matthew carries us back to the Old Testament, showing us that the ministry of John, likewise, finds its root in Old Testament prophesy, as we will see shortly. Authenticating the ministry of John in this way was critical for Matthew, both, because the Jews in general had a respect for John, and because affirming the prophetic calling and ministry of John would automatically affirm the Messianic office of Jesus, whom John boldly, clearly and unapologetically declared to be the Messiah.

Suffice it to say, that we will spend the next few weeks with John the Baptist, paving the way (with him) into our Lord's public ministry.

### **I. John the Baptist**

Matthew begins then, by telling us that following our Lord's return to Nazareth, where He settled in and grew and matured (see Luke 2), at some point, this rugged figure of a man pops on the scene, preaching throughout the wilderness of Judea, calling people to repentance (Read

verses 1-2). Now, before we move into verse 3, brethren, consider the shocking and significant impact of John's ministry, lest we would be tempted to think that, being out in the wilderness, only a few people (and perhaps some hyenas and jackals) heard him.

1) Remember, by and large, there has not been a prophet in Israel for hundreds of years, since the prophet Malachi spoke his final words on behalf of God. And so, to have someone now boldly and authoritatively speaking on behalf of God, would have gotten the attention of any who had directly heard him, and then, word about him would have spread like wild fire, leading many more to come out to John...as it did (Read verses 5-6). And so, John didn't have to enter into the cities. Everyone was coming out to him! And as we will see in a few moments, there is both a prophetic and a symbolic relevance for why he conducted his ministry (preaching, baptizing and gaining a following) out in the wilderness.

2) But secondly, notice as well, the startling content of his preaching, which centered upon repentance and preparing one's heart for the kingdom of heaven, which was now at hand. Now, the implications of this exhortation are both profound and eye opening, because the Jews would have immediately recognized the fact that John was declaring that the Messiah had arrived. In fact, at first, some thought that John himself, might have even been the Messiah (see John 1:19-20), until he emphatically avowed that he was not. You see, the whole "kingdom of God/heaven" theme, which in and of itself implies the reality of a King to lead that kingdom, referred back to God's promise to David, concerning his coming Son, who would reign over Israel (and all nations, for that matter) forever. The statement itself was a Messianic statement.

Now, factor in the reality that Israel had been under foreign rule since the time that they had been exiled by the Babylonians (having had to serve the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans), you can see how John's declaration concerning the arrival of the Messianic "Kingdom of heaven" would have grabbed the ears of all the people. Now, of course, at this point, like John himself, the Jews had not understood the necessity of this Messianic King having to die, unto the ultimate building of His kingdom via the church (while He reigned in heaven), but the Messianic claim of this declaration, and the call to repentance in light of it, were understood nonetheless.

And so, the arrival of a prophet on the scene, after hundreds of years of divine silence, coming with this Messianic message, was a huge deal, which is why the religious leaders themselves wind up sending messengers to interrogate John, as we will see next time, Lord willing.

Having considered this brief introduction to John the Baptist, let us then turn our attention to the prophetic statement that is made about him, which Matthew records here, and which is found in Isaiah 40:3 (Read Matthew 3:4) [Note: Luke (3:4-6) extends the quote to verse 5 of Isaiah 40].

## **II. The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: Isaiah** (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Our main text takes us back to a very encouraging prophecy, which Isaiah had spoken, as a means of comforting the Jews, when they were later to be exiled from their land, by the Babylonians, in keeping with God's judgment against His rebellious people. It was a prophecy of hope for a people who would virtually lose all hope while they dwelled in the land of their captors. From the standpoint of the Jews, whose temple, city and wall were destroyed, naturally, it would seem impossible that they could ever return to the Land of Promise, where the Lord had once dwelt among them. And although they deserved to remain forsaken by God, the encouraging news, given here by Isaiah, was that God was yet going to forgive them, ultimately restoring them back to their land. The road of judgment and misery would eventually merge back, into a road of peace and blessing (read verses 1-2).

And then, it is verses 3-5, which are attributed to the ministry of John the Baptist, by Luke, with Matthew highlighting verse 3 alone. And the picture here painted by Isaiah, which also suits Matthew and Luke's context as well, was that, as God was preparing to bring the people back into their land, by faith, they were to prepare their own hearts for this deliverance, by concentrating their focus on humbling themselves, repenting, returning to God and seeking His will, entrusting their physical dilemma/circumstances to God, who had promised to deliver them. In many ways, you could also see this as a visible illustration of our Lord's command, not to worry about what you eat or drink or wear (all of the basic necessities of life), but rather, to seek first His kingdom, knowing that God would take care of their physical needs. It would take

faith, for the Jews to concentrate their efforts on returning to (and seeking) the Lord, while entrusting their physical welfare to Him, going forward, especially as they were exiles in a foreign land, and in light of the fact that their homeland was destroyed. Needless to say, the “kingdom of heaven” proclamation of John (in Matthew’s gospel) was a “return to the Promised Land” proclamation by Isaiah (here in Isaiah 40), both picturing redemption, in their own, respective settings. [Read verses 3-5]

By means of His deliverance, the Lord would humble the exalted, exalt the humble, and smooth out the mess that His people had created by their utter rebellion. They made their bed, as it were, and they slept in it, and now God was going to clean house, and He would powerfully glorify His Name by means of the whole process and outcome.

Isaiah then, being the “voice of one crying in the wilderness,” speaking to the Jews (via this prophecy, well beyond his actual living years), serves then to prepare the Jews for their return. Now, all of that said, let me just summarize the message that Isaiah was to give to the exiled Jews (Note: vs. 6a):

1) Isaiah was to remind the people of the fragility, brevity and instability/unpredictability of life; all realities which the Jews had lost sight of, when they were living comfortably (and sinfully) in their own land. And furthermore, they needed to be reminded that the only unbreakable, unending, certain reality, that they could rest their souls upon, was the sure Word of God, which they had failed to believe, when they were comfortable in their own land. Their present circumstance (captivity) was a sobering picture of these realities (Read verses 6b-8).

Flowers are beautiful, but they are fragile and they fade very quickly. Such is the case with life. But, God’s Word endures forever. And so, the first portion of the message of the “voice crying out,” unto preparing the hearts of God’s people, was to settle their hearts, not in this fragile, brief and unstable life, but rather, on the sure Word of God.

2) Isaiah was to exhort them not only to cling to God’s Word and to “number their days,” as it were, but furthermore, to rest confidently in the faithful, gracious and omnipotent hand of God, who, by grace, would yet lead them out of their captivity, as a loving shepherd leads his sheep to safety (Read verses 9-11). As they turned their hearts to trust and hope in God, even in such seemingly impossible circumstances, He would yet lead them; He would carry and nurture

them, back into their own land, the Land of Promise, where God had promised to dwell with His people.

3) Finally, in the rest of this prophecy (verses 12-31, which we do not have time to read now), the “crying out voice” seeks to remind the people of the fact that God has not only promised to do this, but He is also more than capable of doing what He has promised. Isaiah here paints one of the most glorious pictures of the incomprehensible and infinite power of God, so as to remind His presently down trodden and hopeless people, that God is more than capable of rebuilding what has been broken. He is all powerful and all sovereign, and the world, as a whole, is no match for God, nor is it capable of keeping Him from doing whatever He pleases, whenever He pleases. And God happens to be in the very business of glorifying Himself (His power, wisdom and Name) by raising up the lowly and the defeated, such that, they overcome and replace the exalted and prosperous.

This is the comfort which God seeks to bring to His exiled people, even many years before they actually go into captivity, all the more glorifying the certainty of His Word, which again, stands forever! Having considered our text then, back in its original context, let us now fast forward to Matthew’s expression of its fulfillment in the ministry of John the Baptist.

### **III. The Voice of One Crying in the Wilderness: John** (Matthew 3:1-3)

Like Isaiah, John has a message to those who are in exile, to which, he cries out with a like message, calling the people to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven was at hand.” For John, however, this call for a preparation of the heart was not unto looking for God to restore the people to the *physical* Land of Promise, for the people were already there, when he spoke these words. Rather, it was that they might be prepared to enter the *kingdom of heaven*, God’s spiritual Promised Land, which secured the very entryway into eternal glory.

And therefore, the exile was not presently a *physical* exile either, because again, the Jews were in their own land, even though they were presently under Roman rule. Rather, the exile was *spiritual*, as well, indicative of the hardened, lost condition of the Jews (and not only the Jews, but ultimately, the whole world, which was at enmity with God because of their sin, and they were under the deceptive power and sway of the devil).

And John, like Isaiah, was preparing a highway for God, in calling the people to repentance. We read about, how God would come and lead His people through the wilderness, as a tender shepherd caring for His sheep. Only, again, John was not speaking of God coming in to lead the people out of physical exile. Rather, being the forerunner of the Christ, He was preparing a highway for Christ, who would come and redeem His people out of their spiritual exile. And as the tender and loving Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ would lead and carry His flock/people through the wilderness and into His heavenly Promised Land.

Beyond the shadow of any doubt, John the Baptist and Matthew (and ultimately, the Holy Spirit, of course) wanted the Jews (and us, through this Gospel account) to make the spiritual connection of mankind being brought out of spiritual exile, to what was pictured in the physical exile and return of the Jews in accordance with Isaiah's prophecy. You see, the reality is, and always has been, that since the day that our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, mankind has gone into exile. Indeed, the first exile happened right there at the Garden of Eden, where we are told in Genesis 3, that God drove them out of the Garden and set up Cherubim and a flaming sword, so that they could not return. And since then, especially in the vivid pictures given through Israel's example, we have seen in very illustrative ways, the concepts of dwelling in God's presence (via bloodshed), and exile out of God's presence (via unrepentant idolatry and rebellion).

You see, the glorious picture of redemption, which is the ultimate theme of Scripture (and of the existence of this world and history, for that matter) deals with the fact that man's greatest problem is that he is born a sinner and is alienated from, and at enmity with his God. And think about it. Is there no more important and dreadful news than this, for creatures who exist in a creation that was created by and for God? None of this is happenstance! Mankind has a serious problem! We are naturally born and living in exile. Now, we try to dress up that exile, by defining life as the summing up of all kinds of material trinkets, and things that can busy us, to the extent that we cope and move on...until we die and stand before the God, whom we have deeply offended, and face His judgment seat. But, it is exile nonetheless. There's a lot of wealth in Babylon, but it's still exile.

And so, in the midst of the wilderness of this exile, a voice cries out, seeking to gain our attention, so that, we might be shaken, and that we might awaken to the truth which we all naturally suppress. God is, and He is defined by His own holy and righteous terms. And if we remain in this exiled condition, we will face eternal judgment, at the hands of this holy and righteous God, who hates all sin. But, there is a kingdom of God/heaven, the foundation and infrastructure of which, is being built in this world. God is at work. God is building His kingdom, and there is a way of freely entering it. But, we must make peace with our God, by embracing the King, the Messiah, to whom He has given all authority and power over all things!

And this glorious King, is none other than the Son of God, Jesus Christ in the flesh, who prepared a way into His kingdom, by means of His own substitutionary death and Atonement. Yes, He entered this world through the womb of a woman, during the time of John the Baptist. And John, as the forerunner, proclaimed Him and called all to embrace, believe in and follow Him. He, this Jesus, alone, is the way out of exile and into the Kingdom of Heaven, by means of His righteous life and His sacrificial death on the cross for sinners like us. And He was raised from the dead three days later, and has ascended to the right hand of God, and will return to close out history as we know it, in due time.

This, friends, is the great message of the Scriptures, portrayed in the historical events surrounding the nation of Israel, found through all manner of symbolic elements in the Old Covenant Law, prophesied about by every prophet, spoken of in song, and declared by John the Baptist as such, right there in the first century. He is the incarnated comfort, who offers Himself, not only to exiled Jews, but to exiled humanity as a whole. [Note: Lord willing, we will address the important topic of “repentance,” next time]

#### **IV. Conclusion**

1) Are you still living in exile, entrenched in a world that is dying, and fading, and full of instability? Are you caught up in the lusts and distracting trinkets of Babylon? Consider, that judgment is on its way, and may be here sooner than later for you. Why will you die in your sin? [The Gospel for fading flowers]

2) The call for believers to, like John, preach the Gospel (Street preaching—not harder).