

Preparation (Isaiah 40:1-5 and Matthew 3:1-12)

10 December-2023

Isaiah 40:1-5

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.

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.

⁴ Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 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.'"

⁴ John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Sermon: Preparation

Please have your Bibles open at **Isaiah 40:1-5** – then we'll look at **Matthew chapter 3**.

There's an **outline** – if you'd like to take notes. Let me **pray**...

Context/Preparing

We're **building up to Christmas Day** – and the birth of our Saviour – the **Lord Jesus**
Last week we looked at a **prophecy from Isaiah** – from 700 years before Jesus was
 born – And the **prophet Isaiah described a coming Messiah and Saviour** –

[Slide 1-Last Week]

And Isaiah said this **coming Messiah** would be:

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace

there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne

and over his kingdom,

establishing and upholding it

with justice and righteousness

from that time on and forever.

So last week we concluded that no matter what's going on in our lives and in this
dark and gloomy world – we have **the certain hope of this Messiah** – Jesus the
Son of God – **who saves us for Heaven**

[Slide 2 -This Week]

So, this week – we're asking ourselves – how we **prepare** to **celebrate the birth of**
Jesus on Christmas Day – and how we **prepare** for **Jesus coming again at an hour**
we don't know when?

In our Bible Study Growth Groups – we asked the question – how do we prepare for Christmas – both **practically** and **spiritually**

Before we **answer** that question

Let's see how **God's Word** tells people they should **prepare** for Jesus' coming.

And that **preparation** starts in our Old Testament reading **from Isaiah 40** – some 700 years ahead of Jesus' birth – so about 2700 years ago!

[Please turn your Bibles to Isaiah 40]

The Word of God prepares the way for the Lord (Isaiah 40:1-5)

[Slide 3-prepare]

The context is that for 39 chapters – **Isaiah has been warning Judah** (Southern Kingdom of Israel) **that they will be going into exile in Babylon** (modern day Iraq) – because of Judah's continued sin and rebellion against God. Judah's northern neighbours – the Northern Kingdom – have already been **taken into exile by Assyria!**

By being taken off into exile – it is **symbolic of the broken relationship between God and His people – Israel**. It's **symbolic of** their **separation from God** – because of sin. Something we too have to face.

As sinful people – that we all are – **we are in spiritual exile from God**.

But here in verses 1 and 2 – the Word of God comes to Isaiah – and **it prepares the way for the Lord Himself to come** – and bring an end to this exile.

God tells Isaiah in v1 “***comfort, comfort my people***”

The reason there is comfort for God's people is because as v2 explains the people of God have completed their hard service – **their punishment for their sin has been paid for in double.**

We're not for a moment to think that God is cruel and giving His people double the punishment they deserve. No – here, the word double literally means 'to fold over, fold in half' (Exodus 26:9). When something is folded over, each half corresponds exactly with the other half, and this gives the idea of an exact correspondence between sin and payment for sin. The sin has been matched with the exact punishment. (Motyer)

For the people of Judah going into exile – **it means there will be a limited time in exile.**

For the people of Judah already in exile – **it means there is an end to their time in exile** – when they've served their punishment. Just like a person in jail does their time and is released.

And for us in spiritual exile – it means there is an end to our exile because of our sins – and that the punishment for our sins has been paid in full.

Isaiah is going to tell us that we don't have to get punished for our sins – **the Lord has plan to take this punishment from us!** The Lord Himself will pay for our sins!

Isaiah goes onto to talk **of a voice calling** in v3-5

This voice is proclaiming God's word and telling people to prepare to meet the **ONE** – the Lord has planned to come and make things right between God and humankind.

You see the problem is – whether it's the people of Israel and Judah back in Isaiah's day – or us here today – we can't stop sinning – and so we deserve punishment.

But - God has a rescue plan – He Himself will be the rescuer – and He will send a Messiah

But first God will send a messenger – it's the messenger's voice that Isaiah is talking about

And the messenger has a simple message “*make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord*”

What does it mean to “*make straight in the desert a highway for our Lord*”?

The **desert** is often used symbolically in the Bible to represent a place of barrenness, hardship and spiritual desolation and isolation. Like when the Ancient Israelites had to wander in the desert for 40 years because of their sin and rebellion of God – before they were allowed to go into the Promised Land.

Here in Isaiah, it's a picture of God's people travelling through the desert into Exile – and also a picture of when their time in exile is done – and a picture of them returning their Promised Land again.

So, what the messenger is telling people – including us – is to get back into a right relationship with God – the way to the Lord – must be a level straight road – the obstacles in our hearts must be removed so that our hearts can receive the Lord.

Isaiah describes these obstacles on the road as valleys that need to be raised up and mountains that need to be made low – so that the road is level!

What obstacles – what valleys and mountains – are there in our lives – stopping our hearts from being towards the Lord?

- Sinful behaviour – like – **anger, hatred, unforgiveness, bitterness, grudges, addiction, impatience; foul language and sexual impurity**
- Also, things – like – **doubt, fear, anxiety, being consumed by the past and not letting it go; negative influences from family and friends; or just being too busy to let God into our hearts; or too consumed by the world around us to put God first**
- Then there's just plain unbelief – we don't want to believe in God and His Son Jesus!

The messenger with this voice is saying – if we're going to get back into a proper relationship with God – these obstacles need to be removed!

For that to happen – we must take God's Word seriously – and let the Word of God prepare the way for the Lord...

The benefit of doing that – Isaiah says – is that this will lead to the Glory of the Lord being revealed to us.

In other words – once we've prepared our hearts for the Lord – we'll meet the Lord in all His glory – we'll have a relationship with Him – and we'll be saved for Heaven – that's the Glory!

(pause)

We then fast-forward 700 years from Isaiah's time to our NT reading from Matthew 3:1-12

[Please turn to Matthew 3 in your Bibles]

God's Messenger prepares the way for the Lord (Matthew 3:1-12)

[Slide 4-God's Messenger]

And this messenger with the voice calling – that Isaiah promised

Finally shows up

And He's **John the Baptist** – who just so happens to be **Jesus' cousin** too

And **John is the wilderness** – remember the **wilderness** or **desert** is symbolic with being in **spiritual exile because of sin**

And **John** has a **simple message** in v2 – ***“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”***

What John is saying is - the time has come – God's Promised Messiah – has come from Heaven – and you're going to meet Him – so you need to repent

And if we want to know what repent means – John tells us – by quoting from the same Isaiah reading – we just looked at

Repent means “*preparing the way for the Lord by making a straight path to meet Him*” – getting rid of all the obstacles we mentioned earlier!

Now John might be a weird guy – dressed in unfashionable camel hair clothes – and he might have one of the worst diets we've come across – but His message is spot on –

People need to **confess their sin to God** – and **say sorry to God** – and **commit to following God's way** in their lives from now on

John's ministry is super successful – see vv5-6 – **heaps of people** from Jerusalem, Judah and around the Jordan – **come and confess their sins** – and are **baptized in the Jordan** – as symbol of their **sins being washed away** – their old life is left in the water – and their new life with the Lord comes out of the water with them – **a life committed to the Lord**

Unfortunately, there are bunch of **religious leaders** in v7 – The **Pharisees and Sadducees** – whom John gives a massive uppercut to – he calls them a “***brood of vipers***”

John knows **these religious leaders aren't** fair dinkum

John knows **they've just come to see what's going on at the River Jordan** and

John knows **they haven't** come to repent and confess their sins

Because these Pharisees and Sadducees – **don't** think they need to repent – they think they're okay

But John warns them in vv8-10 – if they don't repent of their sins – and show some evidence of it in their lives – **they will be chopped down like some dead fruitless tree!**

For us – **we have a choice** – we can be smart like the people who came to John and confessed their sins and were baptized – or we can be self-righteous like the Pharisees and Sadducees – and kid ourselves we don't need to repent!

(pause)

John goes onto to explain that **his ministry is simply to prepare the way for the Lord – and that there is someone coming after Him – and of course this someone** - is the Lord Jesus – who turns up in the next few verses of Matthew 3

John says humbly in v11

“I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire”

What John is saying is that to become a follower of Jesus – we **not only** repent – and get baptized with water – but when we follow Jesus – we get baptized with the Holy Spirit – who comes and lives inside us.

This can only happen if we **truly believe** Jesus came to die on a cruel cross for our sins to be forgiven and to remove those obstacles in the way of our relationship with the Lord – and if we truly believe Jesus then rose again 3 days later – so we can have eternal life in Heaven!

And it's the Holy Spirit that transforms our hearts and minds – and helps us to become like Jesus – and helps us deal with those obstacles – that process is called **sanctification**.

John also says **Jesus comes as God's judge** – that's the **fire part!**

V12 – Jesus has a winnowing fork at the threshing floor of the harvest – and **He will sort out the wheat (the believers) from the chaff (the unbelievers) and the chaff (unbelievers) will be burnt in an unquenchable fire.**

We don't want to be **the chaff!**

John also says in v11 – that **Jesus is so powerful** – than **John is not even worthy to carry Jesus' sandals!**

John is expressing his humility and acknowledging the superiority and holiness of Jesus.

The act of carrying someone's sandals was considered a lowly servant's task in the culture of that time. By John saying he is not worthy to carry Jesus's sandals, John is emphasizing the immense greatness and holiness of Jesus compared to himself.

John sees himself as unworthy in comparison to the one who is to come after him, implying that Jesus is of such high status and importance that John is not fit to perform even the humblest of tasks for Jesus!

How can we be like John the Baptist?

How can we be like John the Baptist?

[Slide 5-Like John]

- **Practice humility like John did:** recognizing our limitations and shortcomings – and acknowledging the Lord's greatness and holiness.

- **Emulate John's servant heart:** by actively seeking opportunities to serve others.

Perhaps we know someone who has lost a loved one this year and they will be miss them this Christmas – there will be an empty seat at the table. **We could phone them, send them a card or visit them to show we're thinking of them.**

Perhaps we know someone who will be on their own this Christmas – **we could offer them our hospitality. Jesus says when we do this – we're doing it for Him!**

Perhaps we know someone who's struggling to make ends meet – and **we are in a position to help?**

- **Like John – we can point people to Jesus – the Saviour.** John was a signpost preparing people to meet Jesus.

That's our job too! (Matthew 28:16-20)

Christmas time is a great opportunity to point people to Jesus – as the reason for this time of year. If we're a bit anxious about how to point people to Jesus – **we can simply invite them to our Christmas Carols next Friday or our Christmas Eve or Christmas Day services – and let God's Word do the rest – when they come!**

How can we prepare our hearts for Jesus' coming?

[Slide 6-Hearts]

So - how do we prepare our hearts for Jesus' this Christmas both **practically** and **spiritually** – that was the question we asked in our Growth Groups/Bible Studies?

Practically:

- We can **prepare a list of gifts** we want to buy;
- We can **organize special days that we get together with family and friends** over a meal to celebrate;
- We can **decorate our homes** – Christmas tree, lights and decorations;
- We can **send Christmas Cards and messages**;
- We can **donate** to Bible Christmas Tree; PresAid or other Mission Partners

Spiritually:

- We must continue to **confess any unrepented sins**
- We can take time to **reflect on the spiritual significance of Christmas.**
Reflecting on God's promises of sending a Messiah. **Reflecting on the love, joy, peace and certain hope of salvation that the birth of our Lord Jesus brings.**
- We can **read** the relevant **Old Testament promises fulfilled by Jesus' birth.**
Read the accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 1-2, Luke 2).
- We can consider **reading Luke's Gospel (24 chapters) one per day**; so that by Christmas Day, **we have the full story of Jesus' Mission.**
- We can engage in **daily advent devotions and Bible readings and prayers**
- We can **share the love of Jesus with others** – which takes many forms!

- And we can use the Christmas period – to **tell others about the hope we have in Jesus!**

(pause)

Just like the people from Isaiah's time right up to the time of John the Baptist **were waiting for Jesus to come** - we are in a similar position – **waiting for Jesus' to come again** – Jesus says in Matthew 24:44:

[Slide 7-Matthew 24:44]

So, you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him

How can WE prepare for Jesus' Second Coming?

Well – because - we don't know when Jesus will come again – and it could be today or tomorrow – I pray we can see an urgency – in sharing our hope of Heaven that we have because of Jesus – with others who don't believe in Jesus yet.

So, my challenge this morning is: -

The best way to prepare for Jesus' Coming is to share our faith with others – all I'm asking us to do – is to invite ONE person you know to come along and hear **God's Word.**

It's the most loving thing we can do – because as John the Baptist said – Jesus **ALSO** comes with fire to judge – and we don't want anyone missing out on Heaven – do we?

Let's pray...

Thank you, Father, that you had a rescue plan to comfort us and bring us out of spiritual exile because of our sin.

Thank you for sending Jesus to take the punishment for sin and remove it from us.

Thank you that Jesus offers forgiveness and eternal life to all who care to believe in Him.

As we prepare for Christmas and for Jesus' return – help us to see the urgency in sharing our faith with others.

Help us to be ready for Jesus' return – come Lord Jesus come! In His name. Amen.

Benediction (John 3:30)

Let me finish with some words from John the Baptist from John 3:30 – it explains John's attitude towards Jesus – and it must be our attitude too. Not just at Christmas time but all of our life.

John says: “He [JESUS] must become greater; I [JOHN] must become less”. AMEN

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