

## Opening Words

Surely God would act. Surely the time of promise would come. Surely God's voice would be heard. And that is when the shout went out through the land. A voice in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

## OSL 011 A Prophet in the Wilderness 1

Silence! For 400 years the voice of God had been silent, and the people of God languished in the land waiting for God to fulfill the promises. In the land they labored. They struggled to survive. They had reestablished temple worship, the sacrifices, and the keeping of the Torah, but still the promises of God's coming kingdom were only a matter of hope and faith. The kingdom they saw around them was the kingdom of Persia, and then the Greeks, and then the greatest horror of all; the genocidal atrocities of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. He demanded that the Jews leave their ways and become gentiles, become Greeks and embrace the dominant culture of the world – Hellenism with all its beauty, all its glory, and all its idolatry.

God's people were forbidden to circumcise their sons. Copies of the Torah were confiscated. An image of Zeus was erected in the Temple, a pig was sacrificed on the altar, thousands were sold into slavery, thousands more martyred. But a slender beam of light shone in Israel. An old priest, Mattathias rebelled against the tyranny, and his five sons fought to throw off the tyranny of their time. Jewish independence at long last was gained. Israel was free again!

But the joy of the newfound freedom did not last long. The new rulers of Israel jockeyed for political power. Corruption entered the land. Protest movements started. A new group of pious, law-keeping men separated themselves from the rulers of Israel. They were Pharisees, and they sought to keep the laws of God and to make them relevant for the challenging times in which they lived. They believed that keeping the law, down to the tiniest detail, was the necessary requirement for God's kingdom to come. Others were even more strict and left the people entirely. They settled in the wilderness close to the Dead Sea. They believed they were the holy remnant of Israel and by their purification rituals and strict observance of the Law of Moses, they would usher in the kingdom of God. These were the Essenes, and they believed their wilderness asceticism would precipitate a new exodus of God's people from gentile bondage and corrupt Jewish leaders.

But the kingdom did not come. Instead came the kingdom of Rome, and its ironclad, powerful hand clamped down upon the people who were once again subservient to a foreign power. A half-Jew, Herod, the son of the Idumean Antipater and a Jewish princess ruled the land. He was gifted. He was brilliant. He was a warrior, he generously agreed to beautify the temple in Jerusalem, yet he also built pagan temples in other cities. He was a friend of Rome, and he was a tyrant who became paranoid and would kill even his family members to protect his reign.

But there were rumors, rumors in the hill country of Judea, rumors of peasants in Galilee. An aged priest said he saw an angel, that a promise was given, a prayer was answered, and miracle baby was born. It was said this child would be a prophet, like Elijah of old. And there was even a stranger rumor, of yet another child, miraculously conceived to a young virgin in Galilee, born in Bethlehem, words of prophecy uttered over him in the temple, visits by dignitaries from Persia, and then all was quiet again.

For 30 years more as the earth circled the sun in its never-ending orbit, the hand of Rome tightened. A Roman governor ruled in Judea, a son of Herod ruled Galilee. Revolution rose in the air like heat off a desert floor. Surely God would act. Surely the time of promise would come. Surely God's voice would be heard. And that is when the shout went out through the land. A voice was heard in the wilderness. "Prepare the way of the Lord!" And the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the miracle child of their old age stepped forward and began his work to prepare the nation for the coming of the Messiah.

We read, my friends, the verses in the gospels about John the Baptist, or as some call him, John the Baptizer, or as I like to call him John the Prophet. But as we read these verses, we often do not realize the desperate plight of the people of God. They were in a desperate plight politically – Rome was in charge and the Jewish rulers, the Sadducees, had compromised to hold on to some type of power in the land. They were in a desperate plight economically from the oppression of their overlords. They were in a desperate plight spiritually and needed a revival to prepare them for God's kingdom.

This is what John brought. He did not begin his work in Jerusalem among the elite or even in Galilee where patriotic fervor was high. He began in the wilderness of Judea. Why the wilderness? The wilderness was commonly viewed as a place to avoid. It was outside the bounds and structures of society. Many believed it to be the haunt of evil spirits. Yet, the wilderness, in the history of God's people was the place where God revealed himself to his people. The wilderness went with the exodus, and John's ministry was a signal that a new exodus was about to dawn, freedom was coming, and the people must make themselves ready. And isn't this what Isaiah foretold? Listen to his words.

A voice of one calling:  
"In the wilderness prepare  
the way for the LORD;  
make straight in the desert  
a highway for our God.  
⁴Every valley shall be raised up,  
every mountain and hill made low;  
the rough ground shall become level,  
the rugged places a plain.  
⁵And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,

and all people will see it together.  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

The people knew their history and they knew their scriptures. Word spread like a fire through dry grass. God was speaking again. A new prophet had arisen, and he was announcing that God’s kingdom was at hand!

The gospel writers tell us that peasants from Judea living in the countryside and the artisans of Jerusalem and other non-elites who longed for relief flocked to hear John. They would travel in groups because traveling was not safe if done alone. Unless one was on business, or visiting relatives, or in route to Jerusalem for a festival, one did not travel. But travel they did, caravanning to the location where John proclaimed a new day.

Mark begins his gospel by saying, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” One commentator, however, while not denying that this was indeed good news believes that a better translation would be, “the beginning of the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In ancient times, heralds would proclaim news that would affect the people; if a new ruler took the throne, if amnesty or release from debt was given, if a new royal child had been born, if a ruler had gained a significant victory on a far-off battlefield. A man would travel from city to city heralding this proclamation, proclaiming this good news.

This is what John is doing. He has news of a king, a coming king. The kingdom of God is at hand! What must the people do? They must be baptized! Be baptized? But isn’t that what happened to gentiles who repented of their paganism and embraced the God of Israel? Yes, it was, but the people had strayed from the Lord and they needed to submit to this work of God through the waters of baptism. Like the children of Israel walking through the waters of the Red Sea on their way to the land of promise, now the children of Israel must walk through the waters of the Jordan, confess their sins, and enter this “new land” of God’s new work to fulfill his promises of old.

And gladly did they submit. They were tired of the reign of Rome, and they were tired of their rulers who seemed to care more for their profit than the welfare of God’s people. By the hundreds, perhaps by the thousands the people came and were baptized, but such a movement would soon alert the authorities.

One day, as John was preaching, a delegation approached him. The Gospel of John 1:19 tells us that the leaders of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to question him. These were the men who served in the temple in Jerusalem, the center of the nation, not the center geographically for Jerusalem was in the southern region of the country, but the center of the nation religiously and politically. They came with a question “Who are you?” And though these words are brief in the gospel record, they are packed with other questions. “Your preaching is drawing the attention of the religious and political authorities. They do not look kindly upon such gatherings because they are a threat to the established order. So, who are you to instigate such a movement as this?” The question really was, “Are you claiming to be the Messiah by your actions?”

And the gospel of John tells us in 1:20 that he “confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

“Well, if you are not the Messiah, what then? Are you Elijah?”

“I am not,” he said.

“Are you the prophet that Moses spoke about?”

“I am not.”

Why would they ask these questions? The Jews believed in the coming of Christ, and they believed that Elijah would come to prepare the people before the day of the Lord. This is the prophecy of Malachi in his closing verses. They also believed in the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 18 that God would raise up another prophet like him and that the people must listen to this new prophet.

But John said he was neither. Exasperated, the delegation from Jerusalem asked, “Well, if you are not the Messiah, if you are not Elijah, if you are not the prophet of Deuteronomy 18, then who are you and who do you think you are that you can gather these people together and baptize them?”

And John said, “I am a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord,’ as Isaiah the prophet said. I baptize with water, as you see, but One is in our midst, even now. You don’t him. He will come after me. I am not worthy, even to take the sandals off his feet. And when he comes, he will baptize the people with the Spirit, and he will also baptize the people with the fire of God’s judgment.”

The delegation had their answer. The Messiah and his kingdom were at hand, and in our next lesson we will look more fully at John’s ministry and how he prepared the people for this great and glorious event.