

Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord – Isaiah 40:3-5

Introduction – This text is the hope of the gospel to every person who has ears to hear. In the midst of the wilderness, the Word has been sent. We are to prepare the way of the Lord. The Messiah is coming and He will see to it that every crooked pathway is straightened. He will have His kingdom. He will have His elect. Christmas hope is here and we had better prepare.

The Text – *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare 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 brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the LORD shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” – Isaiah 40:3-5*

The Wilderness – This is not a term of endearment as we might think of ‘the wild, untamed outdoors’. In fact, the scripture always uses this term to describe a place, or metaphorically a state, of barrenness, desolation, disobedience, chaos and anarchy.

Context – Israel is being judged and will be sent into exile, but Isaiah speaks of God’s promise of comfort, forgiveness, and deliverance as though it is as good as done (vv1-2). Just as Israel found herself in the wilderness in her faithlessness under Moses, so she finds herself again under the kings of Judah. And John the Baptist will physically lead people into the wilderness outside of Jerusalem in order to preach to them this same message – they are, metaphorically, in the desert (Luke 3:1-6).

Unprepared – In the wilderness of our sin and rebellion, people draw near to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him (Isaiah 29:13, Mark 7:6). We often find our wilderness quite comfortable. A messenger must come to shake us out of our complacency and show us the great danger in which we live.

Prepare The Way (vv3-4) – In the first verse, we are commanded to do something. In the second verse, it is promised that it will be done. In the work of human history, we see this is exactly what happens. God has commanded that His people do a certain thing (repent, go and tell, be salt and light, etc), and we see that God is constantly at work through the obedient and disobedient accomplishing His perfect plan.

God’s Hand of Preparation and Providence – Nothing thwarts the plans of God. He declared a way to be prepared and it was. When it was time to move the great Sennacharib, God did just that (Isaiah 37:26-29, 33-37). When it was time, Alexander the Great established the Greek Empire (Dan 8:5-7, 20-21). How was this God’s preparation? The knowledge of the Greek language became widespread and, soon after that, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. In the days that the Son of God was born of Mary, the Roman Empire was at perhaps its greatest height. Incredibly diverse provinces had become connected to Rome and the opportunity for the widespread promulgation of the Gospel became available (Gal 4:4). In addition, Caesar Augustus saw to it that the prophecy of the very birthplace of Christ is fulfilled (Luke 2:1ff).

The Preparation of Repentance – As John the Baptist comes, the work of preparation continues. His was a message and a baptism of repentance. The kingdom of heaven was at hand, even now upon the earth. God had prepared a way, and the Israel of God had better be prepared.

Every Valley Shall Be Exalted (v4) – The coming of the kingdom of heaven looks like this: there is not a single sinner turned away who comes to the Lord in repentance and faith. There is not a valley too low. The sinful woman (Luke 7:37ff) and the thief on the cross knew this (Luke 23:42ff). The Samaritan whore was lifted up as well (John 4). Before, when something clean came into contact with something unclean, that which was clean was ruined. In Jesus Christ, the opposite was taking place.

Every Mountain Brought Low – At the same time, the kingdom of heaven came and poured out contempt on all human glory and conceit. Those who could justify themselves were condemned (Luke 16:15).

The Crooked and the Rough Places – It is now obvious that Isaiah and John were not referring to a physical road, but rather to the thoughts and intentions of men’s hearts. The message of God taking on the nature and flesh of a man, that flesh then being nailed to a cross in allegiance to other gods and kings, that message of sins forgiven through this work, is nonsense to those perishing (1 Cor 1:18-19). But it is those very ones to whom the message is coming. These crooked paths shall be made straight.

The Glory of the Lord (v5) – The glory of the Lord prophesied here, and proclaimed again by John, was beheld in the Lord Jesus Christ, by angels and shepherds at His birth, and by the apostles and disciples in His life, death, burial and resurrection (John 1:14). Glory was not in heaven alone. It came to the earth, and though Christ has risen to heaven, we now reflect that glory, though imperfectly, as His body by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18).

All Flesh Shall See It Together – Jew and Gentile both saw the glory of the Lord. The Christian church brought down that dividing wall, and the gospel goes to the ends of the earth. But it is not due to ourselves, our fancy tactics and plans. It is not in our excellence of speech or of wisdom, but in the power of God (1 Cor 2:1-5), for *“the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”*

Another Christmas, Another Advent - And every year, just as every day, we are called to prepare the way of the Lord
Valleys - This word of hope and grace. Our sins are forgiven in the Lord Jesus Christ. Without Him we are lost in a wilderness barren of any fruit worthy of the Lord. In Him, we are cleansed, freed, reborn, renewed, ingrafted, and Spirit-filled to bear the fruit of the Lord.

Mountains - This is the word of truth. Self-justifiers will be brought down low. This is as good a time as any to repent now of any "Phariseeism". And upstanding citizens of the church are the most susceptible to this temptation. The fruit of such repentance will show forth in homes, in marriages, in relationships with children, parents, employers and such. What a glorious Christmas gift to give.

The Mouth of the Lord - God has not become silent, nor has He left the planet. His Spirit has been poured out and that Holy Spirit is among His people, preaching this gospel to the world. He is just as involved providentially in the rising and falling of kings and kingdoms - and all to accomplish this end: the revealing of His glory which is the salvation of the Lord. And so, in another sense, we, the church, are the messengers Isaiah foretold. O come, Emmanuel!

Dave Hatcher - December 14, 2003