

## **“Where in the Wilderness” (Matthew 3:1–11)(9.12.21)**

Matthew 3:1–11 (NIV84)

**3** In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea <sup>2</sup> and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” <sup>3</sup> This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the desert,  
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,  
make straight paths for him.’ ”

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. <sup>6</sup> Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

### **The word of God for the people of God.**

LET US PRAY.

Title: **“Where in the Wilderness”**

INTRODUCTION:

What is revival if it is not Almighty God calling His people out of the wilderness of this weary world? We are continuing our journey through the book Praying with Fire: Seeking His Presence through the Revival Passages of Scripture by Dr. Mark D. Partin. Up until this point we have focused on Old Testament scriptures. Today, we open up the Gospel of Matthew to find God still pursuing His Chosen People. We will demonstrate the consistency between the Old Testament and the New Testament. We will see that figures from the Old pointed to those in the New. Almighty God is immutable, meaning He does not change; so, the Lord’s actions are consistent. The biblical themes of divine mercy, love, and judgment continue to be demonstrated and fulfilled.

Yes, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus changed history and the dynamics of faith. Jesus resolves the tension between God’s wrath and love. Jesus did not come to do away with the law but to fulfill it. As the prophets of old called Israel to repentance and holy living, we find John the Baptist doing the same thing. Then the Lord Jesus also preached repentance for the kingdom of God is at hand. And still today, in fact in every generation, we need a bold proclamation for the need of repentance and a return to holy living. My friends, I believe that we are living in wilderness times and need to hear a voice calling, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him.”

BODY:

John the Baptist was certainly a wilderness character. The angel Gabriel had visited John’s father, Zechariah, and explained that his old barren wife, Elizabeth, would have a miraculous birth. John would be a special child, devoted to God. He would be filled with the Holy Spirit and bring many Israelites back to God. The last verse of Luke chapter 1 tells us, Luke 1:80 (ESV) And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.

So, it is fitting that John the Baptist’s ministry was in the Desert of Judea. Let me point out that the Hebrew word for desert and wilderness are the same word. A desert is a kind of wilderness. In most English translations, wilderness is preferred over desert. John dressed strangely. John’s diet was what would be found in the wilderness, with which he was familiar.

The people came out from civilization, from comfort, from the city of Jerusalem and the towns of Judea. He caused a great stir throughout the region. His message was an uncompromising call to repentance,

which required confession and baptism in the Jordan River. God the Holy Spirit must have been convicting people's hearts for there to have been such a significant response.

John the Baptist's harshest pronouncements were against the Jewish religious leaders. They believed their standing before God was secure because of their heritage. They believed their standing before God was secure because of their prestigious positions. "No," John warned; "You are on the brink of burning. You must produce fruit in keeping with repentance."

Take a moment and consider the application for church people. It doesn't matter that your father was a pastor, your grandfather was an elder, and your great grandmother was a deaconess. It doesn't matter that you were brought up in the church and sing in the choir. The critical issue is a faithful life demonstrated by producing fruit in keeping with repentance.

The kingdom of heaven is near because Jesus is near. The one more powerful than John; the one whose sandals John was not worthy to carry. The one for whom the Baptist came to prepare a way.

John is quoting Isaiah 40:3 (NIV84)

<sup>3</sup> A voice of one calling:

"In the desert prepare  
the way for the Lord;  
make straight in the wilderness  
a highway for our God.

Brothers and sisters, before we have Jesus, our hearts are living in the wilderness; a dry and weary land. My preaching on revival over and over again is to help create a highway on which Jesus will enter many hearts. Unless God the Holy Spirit empowers, neither my preaching nor the scriptures will be efficacious. That is why we are praying with fire. Too many professing Christians have set up construction zones and detours that have created roadblocks. This is why we are called to repentance.

Have you been thinking that the wilderness is a bad place? Maybe we need to reframe how we think of the wilderness. If you were never thirsty, you would not see your need for water. If your soul never ached for God, you would never know you needed the Living Water of the Lord Jesus.

Dr. Patin makes this observation: "When I study Scripture, I am amazed by the number of men who had wilderness experiences. Joseph found himself in a wilderness of Egyptian slavery and prison. Moses was literally in a wilderness forty years, on the backside of the desert. Elijah went to the brook of Cherith for three years. David was anointed king and went back to the wilderness with his sheep. John the Baptist came from the wilderness. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness.

Paul, after his conversion, went to the wilderness (desert) of Arabia for several years before returning to seek out the disciples. Everyone God uses greatly has to go through their own wilderness, the wilderness of preparation. In the wilderness, we learn our spiritual weapons: the Word of God and praying in faith. We learn dependency on the Father. We learn what it means to be separated to God. We also learn humility (Deuteronomy 8:2).

The wilderness gives birth to real men and women of God. You will not have to look for your wilderness when you surrender completely to God. He will get you there. What you have to do is be willing to stay there until your lessons are learned. Wilderness experiences can come more than once in a lifetime. Have you been in a wilderness lately? If so, take heart."

Let me shift gears with an illustration from an article from Psychology Today. At first, the connection might not be readily apparent, but it will become clear at the end.

"In the 1950's, Johns Hopkins professor Curt Richter, conducted an experiment with rats. He first took a dozen domesticated rats, put them into jars half-filled with water. The idea was to measure the amount of time they swam before they gave up and went under. The first rat, Richter noted, swam around excitedly on the surface for a very short time, then dove to the bottom, where it began to swim around, nosing its way along the glass wall. It died two minutes later.

Richter then tweaked the experiment: He took other, similar rats and put them in the jar. Just before they were expected to die, however, he picked them up, held them a little while, and then put them back in the water. "In this way," he wrote, "the rats quickly learn that the situation is not actually hopeless."

This small interlude made a huge difference. The rats that experienced a brief reprieve swam much longer and lasted much longer than the rats that were left alone. They also recovered almost immediately. When the rats learned that they were not doomed, that the situation was not lost, that there might be a helping hand at the ready—in short, when they had a reason to keep swimming—they did. They did not give up, and they did not go under.

"After elimination of hopelessness," wrote Richter, "the rats do not die."

There are obviously many differences between humans and rats. But one similarity stands out: We all need a reason to keep swimming."

Yes, hope is a big part of being a Christian. No matter what we are going through, our strength is sustained because we know how God has shown up before. When we survived our wilderness experiences, we have been prepared for new and bigger challenges. You could say that we strive so that we can thrive. One blessing of scripture is that it teaches that we can be confident in our Almighty and all-knowing God.

One of the most popular portions of scripture for all time testifies to the truth of this message.

Psalm 23 (NIV84) A psalm of David.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.

<sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures,

he leads me beside quiet waters,

<sup>3</sup> he restores my soul.

He guides me in paths of righteousness

for his name's sake.

<sup>4</sup> Even though I walk

through the valley of the shadow of death,

I will fear no evil,

for you are with me;

your rod and your staff,

they comfort me.

<sup>5</sup> You prepare a table before me

in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;

my cup overflows.

<sup>6</sup> Surely goodness and love will follow me

all the days of my life,

and I will dwell in the house of the Lord

forever.

How does all this tie together and relate to our nation?

There is no doubt that I love my country and my heart is hurt by the current state of affairs. No, the United States has not displaced the nation of Israel; but, I think the Lord has used us and blessed us in our relatively short history. Even so, like Israel, we have fallen away from God. It seems to be time for another course correction.

Let me now point you to the fourth reflection question in the bulletin: 4) Abraham Lincoln said that the Civil War was God's wrath upon the nation for the sin of American slavery. Is our nation currently in a wilderness state? If not, explain the political and moral climate; and the floods and fires. If yes, what can we learn? How should we respond?

Here is an excerpt from an article on the website "FulfillingthePromises.com:" [Was the Civil War God's Judgment on America for Slavery? - Fulfilling the Promises](#)

*The consequences of institutionalized slavery bringing Divine judgment was not lost on many Americans and was a major theme of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address. Lincoln knew that God had "His own purposes" in bringing the Civil War to the American people. God brings "woe unto the world because of offenses... (and) if we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses," then "He gives to both North and South this terrible war as the woe due to those by whom the offense came."*

George Mason of Virginia, argued against concessions [to the South] and for the immediate outlawing of slavery. He warned of the judgment of God if slavery was allowed to continue, saying, "Every master is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of Heaven upon a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, **Providence punishes national sins by national calamities.**"

Many see the Civil War and the loss of 700,000 lives as the judgment that Mason predicted. Thomas Jefferson shared Mason's concern for it was in the context of the continued existence of slavery that he wrote, "God who gave us life, gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are a gift from God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country **when I reflect that God is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever.**"

Are we not a divided nation today? After the Civil War and its protracted recovery, the United States of America became a world power. The wealth and power grew substantially and we became what is commonly called the leader of the free world. People from all over the globe wanted to come here; and they still do today.

I am not going to make an argument about the spiritual brokenness of our nation. You are probably tired of me decrying the sin-sick condition of our culture. Let me just quote John the Baptist: 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.

CONCLUSION:

Revival Preacher, R. A. Torrey preached a sermon on Matthew 3:11 - Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The sermon title was "Three Fires." For now, we will only look at the baptism with fire.

"The first thing the fire does is it reveals the truth about ourselves. 1 Corinthians 3:13 (NIV84) [each one's] work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

The second thing the fire does is refine us. We need a purifying fire to cleanse our insides. What motivates and moves us? Are we single minded and pure of heart? This fire needs to burn within us, penetrating every dark crevice and hiding place. We need to feel the heat and passion of this fire.

The third thing the fire does is it consumes. In Ezekiel 24:11-13, we are told of the consuming power of fire, the fire of judgment that will consume the filth and dross of Jerusalem. And the baptism of fire consumes, in fact it cleanses by consuming; it burns up all dross, all vanity, all self-righteousness, all personal ambition, all ungovernable temper.

Fire illuminates, meaning it gives light. It gives understanding. Fire creates warmth and makes you glow like a branding iron. Fire imparts energy. Fire spreads; it is contagious."

How many of us have experienced this baptism of fire? Too few I would venture. We must pray for this fire with the same fervor the disciples prayed in that upper room awaiting Pentecost.

Where in the wilderness are you today? Remember Jesus' words in John 3:14 (ESV) "And as Moses lifted up the serpent **in the wilderness**, so must the Son of Man be lifted up," Let that be the burning desire of our heart, to lift up the Savior, the Lord Jesus, for all to see.

Amen and amen. Let us pray.

### **Scriptural Prayer for Revival**

Lord of Glory, I thank You for the preached word. Let me understand how it calls me to repentance. Give me a fresh hunger for Your preached word. Oh God, we need revival. I need revival. Show me how to repent and come before You. Repentance is a gift, and without it, I can never be right with You. Thank You for repentance although it appears so unpleasant (Matthew 3:1–2). Father, teach me how to prepare Your way and make Your paths straight. Since preparing Your way begins with my heart, Lord, let me prepare. Let me understand how time is short and how close is the kingdom of heaven (v. 3). Thank You for confronting and convicting me with truth. Continue to transform me by Your Word. Show me how to adjust my life and lifestyle to You. Let me know fruit worthy of repentance and see evidence of it in my life (vv. 7–8). Let me be earnest for You and indignant about sin. Lord, give me a consuming longing for You. Teach me restitution, and let me not avenge my wrongs. (2 Corinthians 7:11). Oh, Lord, may I bear good fruit. May Your axe fall and consume anything in me that is not of You (Matthew 3:10). Father, let me not get so comfortable with You that I think I am worthy to carry Your sandals. Pour out Your Spirit on my life. Wash me, forgive me, cleanse me, and use me. Wherever You lead me, I will follow. May I bear good fruit for Your glory. Prune me. Baptize me with Your Holy Spirit, completely immersing me in You. Baptize me with fire. Cleanse me, purify me, and make me completely Yours (v. 11). Be glorified through my life. Send a revival of repentance to Your church. In Jesus' name, amen.