

Preaching the Gospel

Friday evening, 5th January 2018

‘The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’ Isaiah 40:3

The opening verses of Isaiah chapter 40 have been on my mind now for some weeks with reference to Galeed, and to my ministry among you. This verse especially has been with me. It describes the office of the gospel minister. It describes what you as a people can expect from a minister in your midst, and it describes how you should view that minister. ‘The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’

This verse of course is firstly a prophecy about the return of the children of Israel out of captivity in Babylon. As we mentioned at the prayer meeting on Monday, the children of Israel were about to go into captivity in Babylon, because of their sins. But the time, the set time, was fixed when the Lord would visit them again with his salvation, when he would bring them forth by his stretched out arm. And about that day, Isaiah prophesied, ‘The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’ There was going to be a way back to their own land.

Then this word has a second, and special, prophetic reference to John Baptist. We read together in John chapter 1, that John confessed he was not the Christ, but he said, ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.’ (John 1:23)

In passing, we note that though the gospels overlap, this is one of the few words that we find repeated in all four of the gospels. When we find repetition in Scripture, when the Holy Spirit repeats things, they are things we must take note of. ‘I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.’ The significance of this voice cannot be understated. It was the herald of the coming of the Christ. It was the primary evidence, the first clue to the Lord’s people that Jesus was the Messiah for who they had been waiting. It was John’s commission as that herald.

But then again, this verse also speaks about every gospel minister. This ministry, the preaching which John had to preach, was the gospel. The gospel is, as Isaiah goes on, ‘Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.’ (verses 4-5) Couched in metaphorical language that is the gospel in a nutshell – a way proclaimed whereby God may be reconciled to a sinner.

This evening I want to consider this word as it has reference to the gospel minister and the ministry of the gospel amongst the Lord’s people. God’s people are in a wilderness. In the world they are strangers and pilgrims, with no home here. If you find this world to be a wilderness, if you are being reminded that you are a stranger and a pilgrim, the preaching of the gospel will be so important to you. You will long to hear the voice of someone proclaiming in the wilderness that there is a way out. A way has been made, a way of deliverance. Our mourning days here below are numbered. They soon shall end. And what will they end in? ‘The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.’ Is that the day you are longing for? Do you long for it because the Lord has made you feel that this place is a wilderness? Here you have no continuing city, no abiding place. You seek a city yet to come, a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. There you will see the Lord. What a prospect!

The goal of the gospel ministry is the gathering of saints out of the wilderness. Sin scatters. We see that at Eden. When Adam and Eve fell, immediately they were turned out of the Garden of Eden, out of the dwelling place of God. Instead they were scattered to the four corners of the earth. We note it again at Babel. When the people of the earth came together in a scheme of sin, God scattered them because of their sin. Sin will always scatter and bring separation. But what is the effect of the gospel? The gospel gathers. The gospel is the exact antidote to sin. The gospel recovers sinners. If the gospel is going to recover those who have been scattered, it will do so by gathering them. And what is the end of that gathering? It is what Jesus Christ says in that beautiful prophecy, ‘And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and *there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.*’ (John 10:16) That is the end of the gospel – that we might be with Jesus. ‘And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’ ‘The mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.’

If you have any realisation of your sins – any knowledge that this world is a wilderness and that it is not your home – then it will make the preaching of the gospel so important to you. It will make you seek after gospel preaching. It will make you seek after this voice that crieth in the wilderness. You will be like one of those people who left the towns and cities that surrounded the wilderness place where John was preaching, and went out to hear the voice of John. 'Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.' (Matthew 11:7-10) These people came out to hear the gospel.

Now, as the Lord would help me this evening, I want to notice:

I. Firstly, and in detail, the preacher

II. Secondly, more briefly, the place of preaching in the church

III. Thirdly, the subjects that form the centre of gospel preaching – the message which true preachers should preach.

IV. Finally, where this preaching takes place – in the wilderness.

I. Firstly, the preacher.

(a) We would like to notice firstly that **the preacher is sent by God**. That is what sets apart a true gospel minister from everyone else. Anybody might stand up to proclaim what they think to be the truth. The only thing that separates a true minister from an impostor is that he is 'a man sent from God.' (John 1:6)

Isaiah here prophesies by parable. In Isaiah's days, roads were not like they are today, and towns and cities were separated by the open countryside. The highways which went between the towns ran through desolate places. You will remember the man who went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He was robbed, and left for dead, until the good Samaritan passed by and helped him. The roads he was travelling on were poorly kept, and passed through lawless places. But when a king would visit his people, including the outlying towns, preparations would be made for his visit. The cry would go before, 'Make straight the roads! Come out of your city and build the highway again! Make a road so that the king can come to visit

you!’ This is the idea in Isaiah’s parable. ‘Him that crieth’ was the messenger announcing the need to prepare for the king.

The messenger didn’t make the announcement on his own initiative. It would be a mad man who stands up and tells the people to build the road because the king is coming, if he did not have the authority of the king to do so. The people would waste their efforts building up the road, and when no king appeared, they would punish the lying messenger. The messenger who went out crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord!’ did so because he had a commission. He had a direct commission from the king. The king sent him. The king told him what to say. The king would tell him, ‘I want to go to such and such a place on this date; you tell the people to build up the road in readiness.’ In this sense we see this parable fulfilled in John the Baptist. ‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.’ (John 1:6) John had a divine commission.

It is the mark of every true minister of the gospel that they are sent by God. It is not ultimately the church which sends a minister. The role of the church in the sending of a minister to preach is to recognise the divine call, the call of God. That is what a church does when a man comes before them as being the subject of a call to the gospel ministry. Their role is to discern the call of God. Not to give the man a call. The call comes from God. Gospel ministers are sent by God to preach. ‘There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.’

Preachers must have a divine call. If they do not have a divine call they will have nothing to preach. Their ministry will have no authority. Remember the two messengers on the day Absalom was killed, Cush and Ahimaaz. Cush was sent by authority; he had something to say. Ahimaaz pleaded to run. He wanted to be a messenger! But he had no message. Ahimaaz outran Cush and when he got to David, David asked him how the battle progressed. But he had nothing to say. In contrast, Cush when he came, he had something to tell. It was a solemn word for David – his son Absalom was dead – but it was a true message. It is a solemn thing for any minister, but especially for myself in the pulpit before you this evening – the need of a divine call. If we – if I – run unsent, we will have nothing to say. If we run unsent, all the hours of labour in the study and pulpit will all be for no avail. It is a solemn work, the gospel ministry.

(b) Secondly we would like to notice that **if we are sent, we will have something to say**. We will have something to preach. What is that? The gospel. The word of God. Luke tells us this about John’s ministry. ‘The word of God came

unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.’ (Luke 3:2) John had something to preach. It was what God had revealed to him. His word.

When we sit in the pew and hear a true gospel ministry we need to remember this. It is not the words of man we hear. It is the word of God. You might say, ‘But some ministers come into the pulpit and preach error.’ Ministers may preach error. Even God’s sent servants, left to themselves, and in the wrong place at the wrong time, may preach error. But when God sends a man, and puts that man in the place where he would have him, and gives him the word to speak, it will be with authority and power – it is the word of God. God tells his ministers: ‘What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.’ (Matthew 10:27) That is the work of the ministry.

Have you ever thought about what Peter writes concerning the ministry of the gospel? It is a remarkable verse. ‘As every man hath received the gift,’ that is, the call of the ministry, ‘even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.’ (1 Peter 4:11) The true gospel minister speaks as ‘the oracles of God,’ as the very words of God.

As you sit in the pew, and especially as we have this three month period before us, there is only one test you can apply to the ministry. It is this. Does he speak in accordance with the Word of God? You want to find when you weigh the ministry up that it is exactly in line with what is written in the Word of God. That it finds an agreement with the experience of your own heart, so that you can say, ‘I have handled, tasted and proved that too.’ These are evidences that the ministry is from God, and that that minister has been sent to preach by God.

The ministry is a solemn privilege. When we get a glimpse of ourselves as sinners and our utter unworthiness of mercy, we get some sense of what a privilege, what a blessing it is, that God has deigned to send poor men to preach his gospel to sinners. We are unworthy to be found here this evening in Galeed chapel. We are unworthy to have the gospel preached to us. I am unworthy of the call to preach the gospel, and I am unworthy of the gospel I preach. But that is the nature of the gospel! The free, unmerited, favour of God – that is the gospel! The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we merited it, and were worthy of it, it would cease to be gospel! The blessing is seen in the fact that it is not for the righteous. Not the righteous, but sinners Jesus came to call. The gospel is good tidings for sinners.

When we feel our unworthiness of the gospel, it will make us prize the preaching of the gospel more and more.

(c) Also, as the minister preaches the word which is given to him, **he is only the messenger** in the Lord's message. He is nothing more than a messenger. John is described as being a messenger. 'As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.' (Mark 1:2) He was a messenger sent forth from God, but nothing more than a messenger. Let's just dwell for a moment on this.

A messenger is nothing in himself. It is the message he bears which is important. When we are waiting for something in the post – may be a parcel, or perhaps a letter from somebody we dearly love – then when the postman arrives, we don't take time asking what the postman's name is, or where he lives, or any of his personal circumstances. That doesn't mean anything to you. When a deliveryman comes with a parcel and asks for our signature, we never waste the time asking what their name is. It is of no interest. No relevance. All that matters is what they are delivering. So it is with the gospel. The preacher who stands in the pulpit is nothing more than a messenger.

The Word of God uses so many illustrations of this. It speaks of preachers as instruments. What is an instrument unless someone puts it to use? The instrument lies there inanimate on the side. The instrument can do nothing by itself. And when a work is accomplished through the instrument, the glory never goes to the instrument. When you go round an art gallery, the glory is the artist's. No glory is given to the paintbrush. So it should be when the Lord's servants stand before you. They are sinners just like you are. They are mere men. Flesh and blood. They fail. They are weak. Left to themselves they will be faulty. They are impotent instruments and without him they can accomplish nothing. All the power must be of God. Paul puts it so forcibly: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.' (2 Corinthians 4:7)

It is a humbling work in the pulpit to be made to feel that we are just an earthen vessel, and have no strength in ourselves. It is a desolate feeling, a desperate feeling, when you sit in your study before you have to go to preach and you look at the word laid on your mind and you say, 'Lord! There is nothing here for the friends this evening! What profit should a sermon on the ministry be to the friends at Galeed this evening?' But we are only the instrument. We cannot apply the Word. I don't know much about you. But even if I did, I know I could not apply the

Word if I tried. The minister has to find at times that even when they know somebody's condition, they cannot apply a word of help. Of course the Lord's servants will try to reach out to the hearer. In one sense it is only right they should, because one of the marks of a God sent minister is a concern for souls. And when you see a soul in trouble, a sheep straying, a sheep on its back, there is a natural desire on the part of the Lord's servant to speak a word that might help. But we often find to our consternation that although we preach what we hope will be comforting, it is made of no blessing to those in need. Yet another time we go with a word which seems so contrary to what we might ever expect to be blessed to a soul in straits and yet it is made a great blessing to them. What this reminds the poor minister in the pulpit is that he is only the instrument. There is no glory for him. I plead with you this evening: keep me in my right place. Don't think more of me that you ought. I am only the messenger – you have to hear the message.

(d) The next thing I would say is this. Though the minister is only a messenger, and not to be esteemed on his own account, **yet the ministry has authority**. Paul said, 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.' (Ephesians 3:8) 'Though I be nothing,' he said elsewhere (2 Corinthians 12:11) That is not trite humility. That is the real experience of the Lord's servants. They feel they are the least of all saints. The most unworthy. The most unlearned. The most unable to speak a word in season. Yet when they stand up in the pulpit, the word has authority.

Why does the word of the ministry have authority? It is not authority which comes from the minister. Paul uses another illustration. He says 'We are ambassadors for Christ.' (2 Corinthians 5:20) An ambassador is sent by a government to another country to represent the home country. So in London we have ambassadors from the United States of America, Norway, and other countries from round the world. They all represent the position of their sending country directly to our government, to our country. We also have ambassadors round the world representing the interests of the United Kingdom abroad. The Lord's servants, says Paul, are the ambassadors of Christ. They are sent to represent Christ before the people. Their commission is to preach Christ. They are sent to declare the holy law of God. They are sent to reprove sin. They are sent to declare the holy judgements of heaven. They are sent to preach the gospel. They are sent to proclaim good news from a far country. They do not come on their own initiative.

They are appointed by Christ. They come with the charge of Christ. That is why their voice has authority. But it is not their authority, but Christ's.

We must note that our text does not say, 'A *man* crying in the wilderness.' It says, 'A *voice* crying in the wilderness.' The man is totally lost sight of. It is the voice. It is the message. If only we could lose sight of the man, and hear only the voice! To know in our soul, because of the answer it finds there, that the voice that speaks proclaims the will of God, because the preaching comes forth with authority. The old saints used to say they desired to hear the Lord's servants with a 'thus saith the Lord.' What did they mean? They wanted to sense the authority of the preacher's sender – the authority of Christ – in the ministry. The man himself might be unlearned and ignorant. At times his thoughts might be broken, his language lame. At times he might stutter and stammer. Nevertheless, if they heard the voice of God speaking by him, it was a seal that he was an ambassador for Christ.

My mother sometimes speaks of Mr Walter Crowter, a supply minister in the early twentieth century, local to here. He died in the Brighton Bethesda. He used to say, 'A hungry soul won't mind eating off a cracked plate.' That puts the minister in his right place. He was confessing like Paul, 'Though I be nothing, the least of all saints.' But he had a precious gospel to preach. And hungry souls look beyond the messenger, and beyond the inadequacy of his speech, and beyond all his insufficiency. They hear and see no man save Jesus Christ and him crucified. Jesus only – that's the gospel – that's the power, that's the food for hungry souls. Such a hearing of the gospel is possible because there is authority, there is power. The man in the pulpit you will acknowledge as the servant, the ambassador, of God. He is the voice, to your soul, crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord.'

Then we must notice, it is authority which doesn't lift up the man. True ministers won't lord it over God's heritage. In one sense ambassadors cannot get lifted up in their position. When they leave their embassy, when they reach the end of their service as ambassadors, they are nothing but ordinary citizens. They have no personal authority. No right to represent their home country. All their authority is borrowed. And it is so with the Lord's servants. Their authority is borrowed. Yet it is real authority. It is power from heaven.

It is weighty authority. A heavy burden. It is one thing to preach here and there Sabbath by Sabbath as an itinerant minister. We always preach to dying sinners – that is a solemn thing. It is solemn to preach to those who don't then live to see

another Sabbath day, or to enter again on the means of grace. Are the souls of the Lord's servants free from their blood? Have we been faithful in the preaching of the gospel? That is a solemn question, which causes the Lord's servants sleepless nights. But coming here with the prospect of becoming pastor, what a solemn thought this is! When we preach different places week by week, there might have been a better man in the pulpit the week before, or a better man coming in the pulpit the next week. Perhaps it may not matter if we fail so much on any particular week. But when a poor man has to stand up week by week and preach to the same people – if we come short, if we fail you, where will you be? Where will we be? You see, friends, we preach in the face of eternity. When we get a glimpse of that, the poor minister wants written over the door of his house as he leaves to preach, he wants written in the front of his Bible, those words of Richard Baxter – to preach as a dying man to dying men! That is a reminder both of the weightiness of the responsibility of the gospel minister, and of what the gospel is – the word of life to dying sinners.

(e) One more point concerning the ministers of the gospel. **They will pass away.** A voice is calling out in the wilderness – but a voice is transitory. You hear a voice. You cannot hold on to it. The lips stop moving, the tongue stops moving, the air stops moving over the larynx, the sound dies away. In a building like this, with an echo, the sound may linger slightly longer than my actual speaking, but it is transitory. It passes away. The Lord's servants come and go. You lost your pastor here not all that long ago. His voice has ceased. But the precious thing is that God is the same, and his Word remains.

Let us look at these verses closely for a moment. We read, 'The voice said, Cry.' That is God speaking to his servants. He says to this man in the wilderness, 'Cry! The poor man in the wilderness asks, 'What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass.' In effect he is saying, 'Lord, there is no hope! What can I cry? They have hard hearts, they don't listen to me, they are hardened in their sin. My preaching has no effect.'

The Lord's servants are often feel that way, you know. I stand here this evening, surrounded by wickedness, in the middle of a city that has largely forgotten God and has no desire for God. As I stand up this evening, what a fool I am! What foolishness preaching is! What a fool I am to think that a man standing in a pulpit

and speaking for fifty minutes is going to have any effect! That's how the Lord's servants feel.

But what does God say? He replies, 'The grass withereth, the flower fadeth.' He is saying, 'True enough,' to the minister's complaint. The Lord doesn't deny that it is the foolishness of preaching that he has chosen. But then the Lord reveals the secret which cheers the heart of his servants. 'The word of our God shall stand for ever.' The Lord's servants come and go, the sound of the voice dies away, but God's truth, God's Word, is truth unchanging. It is the same yesterday, today and forever. 'Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.' (Matthew 24:35) The Word of God abideth forever.

That is the hope of the Lord's servants. When they are taken to their reward, the work is not finished. The work continues. The Lord raises up more servants. He gives replacement ministers, to preach the *same* gospel. This is my hope this evening. The gospel I have to proclaim is the same as that preached by your last pastor. The God I have to trust in is the same God. The God who commissioned me to preach is the same God. He is the same upholding God. The same blessing God. And if he has blessed the Word here in the past, is there not hope that he will bless it here in the future?

II. We come to notice briefly in the second place the priority of preaching.

On Monday, at the New Year prayer meeting, we noticed something about the primacy of preaching. That is what theologians call it, 'the primacy of preaching.' We could call it the priority of preaching. It is by preaching that God has purposed to save sinners. Preaching is first and foremost the means which God uses.

So many people look to other means today. In the last sermon that Mr Frank Gosden preached at the Annual Meetings of the Gospel Standard Societies, he spoke of churches turning away from preaching, and bringing in other means in its place, whether discussion groups, house meetings, fellowship meetings or games. These things may have their place, but we must never look primarily to those things to save sinners. God has appointed one primary means for the salvation of sinners: the foolishness of preaching. That is the primacy of preaching. This is what the true church must hold on to.

This is one of the things that marks out the true gospel church – how they view gospel preaching. It was the mark Jesus gave to John Baptist. When his faith was low, he asked, 'Art thou he that should come? or look we for another?' (Luke 7:19)

Jesus didn't say, 'I am the Christ.' But he said, 'Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see: the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.' (Matthew 11:4-5) That is one of the marks of a gospel church: "The poor have the gospel preached to them." If you find a church where there is no more preaching, or the preaching has been reduced to a 10 minute talk amongst an hour of fellowship, it doesn't speak well for the church. May we ever hold dear the preaching of the gospel! What a precious thing it is!

To nature, preaching is foolishness. You sit in the pew for fifty minutes listening to the preacher speaking. How is God ever going to work by that? But see it from another angle. What is sitting in the pew? It is a sign of submission, of receptiveness. You sit there and you don't say anything. You don't reason with the preacher. You don't add your own words to what the preacher says. That is a picture of the Lord's work in the hearts of sinners. We are passive in our salvation. The Lord's voice speaks. He passes by and he says, 'Live!' And we instantly live. So it is when we sit in the pew, under the preaching of the gospel. It speaks of humility, of being ready to accept what the Lord has to say. When we come in and sit under the ministry, we confess that the preaching we hear is the preaching of the gospel, that it is the power of God unto salvation. We confess that we do nothing towards our salvation. We sit down, submissively, in the pew. It is a beautiful picture when we can see it by faith. When we see it by faith we will love this means of grace – the preaching of the gospel.

The preaching of the Word is effectual. The poor minister gets tempted at times. Perhaps you get tempted at times when you come up week by week and there seems to be nothing for you. This is indeed a solemn thing. We should all examine ourselves, the poor minister in the pulpit and the needy hearer in the pew. How prayerful we should be that the means of grace would be blessed to us. But when God moves in the ministry it is effectual. What do you know of this? Have you known, under the preaching of some poor broken reed in the pulpit, the power of God unto salvation? Have you ever heard the voice of God in the preaching? Has it convinced you of your sin? Have you ever lost sight of the man in the pulpit for a moment, and seen no man save Jesus only? If you have friends, you will realise that (though left to your own carnal reason you will consider it to be foolishness), preaching is the power of God unto salvation. That is why Paul told Timothy above all else to preach the gospel. 'Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season;

reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine.’ (2 Timothy 4:2) Never give up on preaching. When you feel despairing, Paul is saying to Timothy, when you feel it has no effect, when you feel tried that you have nothing to say to the people, don’t give up on preaching. Salvation is through the ministry of the Word. And when you get tried in the pew, thinking there is no point going to hear the preaching today, don’t give it up. Instead seek and pray, that you would hear the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’

III. Again briefly, let us consider the subject of the preaching.

We learn a lot about the subject of preaching in the account of John the Baptist. We don’t read much about his ministry, but what we read leads us to the conclusion that it was a most balanced ministry. When we look over the records of some ministers’ preaching, mine included, there is much imbalance. Some over-emphasise sin at the expense of grace. Others give more prominence to the creature and the experience within us, than to Christ and what he has done for us. But when God speaks by his servants there will be a balance in the ministry. What was the balance in John’s ministry?

(a) Firstly, it had this element: **John preached repentance.** ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.’ (Mark 1:15) He preached the law. We might say, he preached conversion. His ministry had this note, ‘Ye must be born again.’ Because that is at the root of repentance. By nature we will never repent. If we are not born again, we *cannot* repent. We can try to turn from our sins, but unless we are born again there is no real repentance. But in the moment we are born again we are given some knowledge of ourselves as sinners. We begin to loathe ourselves. We begin to loathe our sins. John preached repentance. He warned his hearers to flee from the wrath to come. He reprovved the sins of his generation. This is the preaching of the law. The setting before us of God’s holy standard and the fact that the wages of sin is death. This is the first element which must be found in all true preaching, and by which you must weigh my preaching. Do I preach the law faithfully? Do I preach sin?

The preaching of the law declares that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. That’s faithful ministry. In the ministry of so many of us, left to ourselves, there is a fear of man. There is a temptation, if we know that some in the congregation are moneyed, or have standing in society, to forbear from reproving sin in the pulpit, because of the fear of man. But when the Lord speaks

by his servants they are brought away from the fear of man. John was delivered from the fear of man. He proclaimed fearlessly before the Pharisees, the Roman soldiers, the rulers of the people. He was even fearless before Herod, and explicitly reproved Herod for his specific sins. John preached the law. He preached repentance.

But, it is a one sided ministry if that is all we preach. Maybe you are familiar with the little book of J. C. Philpot's sayings edited by Mr Ramsbottom. It is aptly titled, *Sin and Salvation*. That's the content of true gospel ministry: sin and salvation. There is the Old and the New Testament. There is the law and the gospel.

(b) So we must notice the second element in John's preaching, **John preached the gospel as well as the law.**

'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' (John 1:29) Is that what you need this evening? To see Jesus? That is what the gospel minister desires to preach. As the word this evening began to open up to me, my prayer had to be, 'Lord, help me to preach Christ in this scripture.' We don't want to bend scripture in order to preach Christ where he is not, but it is a good fault to have. Spurgeon says concerning Robert Hawker's *Poor Man's Commentary*, that he sees Jesus where Jesus is not legitimately to be seen, but he goes on to say it is a good fault to have. And it is, in a way, isn't it? We desire to see Jesus in everything. We pray that there might never be a sermon where the minister does not preach, one way or another, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' May the Lord help me as I have to preach before you. May it be your desire, that I would preach Christ. One pulpit I preach in has this engraved in wood below the pulpit Bible, 'Sirs, we would see Jesus.' The Lord's servants need to be reminded of that. A true gospel ministry will have this proclamation in it, 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.'

Jesus said, 'And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.' (John 12:32) There must be the lifting up of Christ up in the preaching. It is not that Christ cannot save without the means. It is not that sinners will fail to be saved if the minister preaches inadequately. No! But nevertheless, when the minister preaches with a desire to see the salvation of souls, where he preaches with a sense of eternity, there must be this aim to lift Christ up. For, 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.'

John delighted in this ministry, didn't he? Twice in the first chapter of John he proclaims the same thing: 'Behold the Lamb of God.' That is an encouragement

to the Lord's servants. It is an encouragement to me as I consider standing before you every week. My biggest fear is that I will be repetitive, I will only say the same things, and you will get fed up with me. But from the chapter here, we infer that on two consecutive days, John preached the same sermon. 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' If the preaching is Christ, if the preaching is balanced – law and gospel, sin and salvation – repetition won't matter.

This would be a precious refrain for any sermon: 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' Here is the Saviour who has been provided by God for sinners. Remember that! Is there someone here this evening who is trying to save themselves? Trying to bring their own righteousness? Remember that salvation is not found in self! God alone saves. He provides the means of your salvation. It is the gift of God – his own dear Son. The Lamb of God. The Father sent his own dear Son into this world. He spared him not. That is a mystery, and a mystery above all others. 'God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' (Romans 5:8) Christ is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world. Christ is the precious offering in the place of sinners. Christ's blood is the precious blood which takes away all sin.

God's way of salvation was displayed there in the type of the Passover lamb. Indeed, it was seen further back, when Abel offered the first lamb. But it was seen even before then. God gave the type in the Garden of Eden, when he took animals and killed them, and made coats for Adam and Eve. Without the shedding of blood there can be no remission of sins. But the blood has been shed. May I never tire of telling you that. The blood has been shed! It still has power to save. Doubt it not! May I never weary of telling you this.

The blood of Christ, a precious blood!
Cleanses from all sin, doubt it not,
And reconciles the soul to God,
From every folly, every fault. (Joseph Hart)

(c) The third element of John's preaching which I would mention is that **John insisted on the work of the Holy Spirit.**

John mentioned the work of the Holy Spirit from the outset in his ministry. He said, 'I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. But he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.' (Matthew 3:11) John preached of the need of

the work of the Holy Spirit. The call to repentance declares the need of the Holy Spirit. 'Ye must be born again.' How can a man be born again? Not by flesh and blood! By water and the Spirit (John 3:5). The precious Holy Spirit.

This is the element which separates better from worse preaching today. So much current preaching is just about Jesus. There is an anecdote told of three ministers in London back in the 1950s. It was said of one, 'He preaches love.' That was no balanced ministry, because he forgot to mention that God is angry with the wicked every day. Of another it was said, 'He preaches Jesus.' You might say, 'That is everything, isn't it?' But the speaker was highlighting that Jesus was only preached as a good example for our emulation. Of the third it was said, 'He preaches God.' Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When Mr Popham was pastor here, he wished so often, 'O that we might be made true Trinitarians.' He wanted us to be taught the necessity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in our salvation. John preached all of this. He proclaimed the Lamb who was given by God the Father. He exalted the Lamb, the Son. And he preached the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit to apply the redemption accomplished by Christ.

(d) The fourth element in the ministry of John was **the end of time**. When ministers are truly sent by God, and when hearers are rightly exercised, we come together into the house of God with a realisation of the solemnity of eternity. Christ is returning to judge the world in righteousness. A day of judgement awaits each one of us. Each one of us will have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ. How will we do? We will be without excuse! Paul is quite clear on this point. Preaching to the Athenians on Mars Hill, in Acts 17, he tells us that God has given us, by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a witness to all of the day of judgement to come.

John made this proclamation. 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel.' (Mark 1:15) The kingdom of God was at hand in this sense that Christ was coming – the king who would reign in righteousness was about to appear. 'Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end.' (Isaiah 9:7) But God's kingdom will come in all its fullness in the last great day. This is prophesied here in Isaiah 40 'And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.' (verse 5)

A true ministry will have this about it – a sense of preaching in the face of eternity. It will address sinners in the realisation that they might die without hearing

the preaching again. If the icy hand of death was to find you this evening, where would you be? If on the way home the Lord should draw near to any one of us and say, *'Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee,'* (Luke 12:20) where would you be? Where would I be? That is what sharpens the preaching of the ministry, when the minister preaches as he realises the closeness of eternity.

Seen in another light, this is a most blessed subject. There is a day coming when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. A day coming when, 'At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.' (Philippians 2:10-11). This day will not be to our glory. It will not be to the glory of the minister who has told you about this day. It will not be to the glory of the prophets. It will not even be to the glory of Jesus Christ himself. But it will be to the glory of God the Father. It is a great mystery.

What a blessed thing it is to preach. 'Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.' (1 John 3:2) 'We shall see him.' A glorious day is coming. It is a most blessed thing to be able to remind you this evening that, despite all the troubles you are passing through in this life, despite a day of small things at Galeed, there is a better day coming! A day when we shall see him, and when there shall be one fold and one shepherd. The gospel will have done its work and we will all be gathered in one. What a precious element this is in the ministry. There is a prospect! A glorious prospect! True preaching is not a dead end. It is but a beginning.

(e) 'The final element of John's preaching is one that I desire to have more and more of in my ministry – **he wanted to magnify Christ**. 'He must increase, but I must decrease.'

John proclaimed, 'There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.' (Mark 1:7) It is said that in those days, a disciple would do anything for his master, other than undo his shoes. A servant was one degree lower than a disciple, because a servant would do anything for their master, even undo their shoe. But what does John say? He says he is not even worthy of doing the job of a servant. He puts himself below a servant. 'The latchet of his shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.'

Paul puts himself in the same place. 'Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable

riches of Christ.’ (Ephesians 3:8) ‘I be nothing,’ he said. (2 Corinthians 12:11) That is the kind of minister you want in the pulpit. This is the kind of minister I desire to be. ‘Lord, keep me in such a place, that I may never desire any glory for myself. But may all the glory be thine. I am unworthy to be found in a pulpit. Unworthy of doing the least good in thy kingdom. Unworthy of being an instrument used in the salvation of sinners. Unworthy of it all. May Christ have all the glory.’

‘He must increase, but I must decrease.’ When a minister has that desire, his prayer as he comes into the pulpit will be, ‘Lord, may the people lose sight of me. May they see Jesus only.’ What a note to have in the ministry. How important!

IV. The final point I want to notice is where this preaching takes place.

‘The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness.’ John preached in the wilderness. What does this show us?

(a) **The soul of the sinner is a wilderness.** Has the Holy Spirit taught you that your soul is barren? That your soul is a wilderness? It is very easy to look at all the world around and talk about the darkness of the days we are found in, and how it is such a day of small things. It is another thing to have to confess this personally. The Holy Spirit teaches his people that we have nothing; that we are absolutely empty, dead, dry, barren; that we cannot think one thought aright; we cannot do one good thing; we cannot even take up the Bible and read it profitably; we cannot pray. What a wilderness we feel ourselves to be!

But what a gospel this is! It speaks to us in our need. Our text tells us that the gospel comes to sinners just where they are. The voice is sent to preach in the wilderness of sinner’s hearts. We read that, ‘the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.’ (Luke 19:10) Do you feel lost this evening? Maybe you hear the minister proclaim the gospel, ‘Come unto me!’ and yet you say, ‘I would. But I am lame, I cannot walk. I am blind, I cannot see the way.’ Then ask the Lord to come to you. In the gospel Jesus comes just where we are.

We have a beautiful picture in the account of the good Samaritan, of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here was a poor man, robbed and wounded and left half-dead. The law could not help him. The Levite passed by on the other side. The self-righteous Pharisee scorned him. ‘But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, *came where he was.*’ How beautiful are those words to a poor helpless sinner. ‘He came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, and went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him.’ (Luke 10:33-

34) That is how the gospel comes. It is to be preached in the wilderness. It is to be preached to sinners. It is to find them exactly where they are.

There is no preparation for the gospel. The true gospel ministry doesn't say, 'You need to be a good person to hear the gospel.' It doesn't say, 'You need to have given up your sin.' It doesn't say you need to attend some preparatory course. No! The gospel says, 'Come just as you are.' You know, that is the greatest stumbling block of all: old self-righteous self always wants to bring something. But the terms of the gospel are, 'Come without money and without price.' Come empty handed, that we might be filled with Christ.

(b) **This world is a wilderness.** The glory of God in creation is defaced by sin, and 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.' (Romans 8:22) All because of sin. This world became a wilderness in the day sin entered into the world. It became a literal wilderness. The thorns and briars sprang up – the effects of sin. The waste places of this world – they are the effects of sin. But also this world is a wilderness of sin. A spiritual wilderness. Sin abounds. Wicked men and women are filling up the cup of wrath. But what is the commission given to the Lord's servants? 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.' (Matthew 28:19) And if they are tempted to give up, if they despair at this, if they think it is a useless thing to try and preach in the wide wilderness of this world, they must remember the adjoining promise: 'Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.' (Matthew 28:20)

The gospel is to be preached unto all nations. That is the only sign of the end of the world. In the sermon Jesus preached to his disciples on Olivet, he gives many signs of the times, but there is only one sign given of the imminent return of the Saviour. It is this. 'And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.' (Matthew 24:14) If you desire to see the hastening of the coming of the Lord – if you truly pray, 'Thy kingdom come' – then your desire will be to see the gospel preached in all nations. That is why the work of the Trinitarian Bible Society and similar organisations is so important. This is not to suggest that we can put our hand to it, or hasten it literally, but we are to plead that God would bless the means to this purpose. 'Thy kingdom come.'

(c) **In the wilderness there was a gathering of hearers.** John preached in the wilderness and the people came to him. 'In those days came John the Baptist,

preaching in the wilderness of Judaea ... Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.' (Matthew 3:1, 5-6) John did not have to go recruiting them. The people came to him. Why did they come to him? Because of the efficacy of the gospel. The efficacy of the preaching of the Word. This is the means God has appointed. He will bless the appointed means. When we rely on the means we will prove that God will use them to draw sinners to himself. God draws sinners to the means. He saves them through the means. John preached in the wilderness, and the people came to him. This is not to be fatalistic about those who surround us in this city. May they ever be in our prayers. But may we never forget that the heart of the gospel ministry is in the pulpit. Where there is a true gospel ministry here, and wherever his servants are sent forth, may we believe sinners will be drawn unto the sound of the gospel.

In closing. Friends, may we realise as we leave Galeed this evening what a solemn thing it is to be without one of the Lord's servants as pastor over the flock. It is a solemn thing to have to rely on reading services. May we truly realise the essential, central nature of the preaching of the gospel to the salvation of sinners. May we prize the privilege of preaching, though we are unworthy of it. What a mercy that God has given us a place where we can gather together to hear the preaching! What a mercy it is to have the ministry lengthened out amongst us! What a blessing the preaching of the gospel is! May we ever prize it! May we never tire of it! May we ever desire to be under the preaching of the gospel to hear the voice of the one that crieth in the wilderness.

May the Lord bless his Word.

Amen.