Session 3: A Prophet Emerges in the Wilderness

I. THE DESERT

A. Out of the sight of everyone in Jerusalem, God formed and fashioned His man in the desert for a long thirty years. The Greek word used here highlights a lonely place with few inhabitants. It can refer to an actual desert or simply a place that is more like a wilderness.

B. Thirty years in the desert prepared John for his six months of public ministry. God formed John the same way He formed Moses and Elijah. However, it is important to recognize that John was not living just to get those six months of public ministry. He was fully alive during the thirty years he was hidden in desert. John’s six months of public ministry was simply a brief window of history when everything John had cultivated on the inside came out.

C. John was not a different person during his public ministry than he was during his time of preparation. God simply chose to put who John was on public display. John did not only carry a message, John had become the message. Luke 1:80 tells us that John was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel. His public ministry was simply God’s revelation to Israel of His friend in the wilderness. John did not suddenly become a public minister; God simply decided to put His friend on display.

D. God often creates “desert” places to form people and prepare them for His purposes. You cannot manufacture a desert experience, but you must understand it when God leads you into a desert place. When many people find themselves in the desert, the first thing they want to know is when the desert seasons will end. How do you know when you are ready to leave the desert? When you don’t care if you ever leave. God puts you in a desert to set your apart so that nothing else matters anymore except hearing His voice and knowing Him. That’s the point of the desert. God uses the desert to form and fashion vessels and He matures every believer in a unique way.

E. There is no formula for how God builds men, because God forms voices, not echos. An echo is a reproduction of a voice that seems identical, but is inferior and does not carry the strength of the original. When we seek formulas, we will produce echos. When we embrace the way God forms men we will see voices emerge. The way to become a voice is not to try to become one. The way is to put on the yoke that God designs for you.

F. The goal is not to get out of the desert. For John his life in the desert was not a path to his calling, it was his calling. He was not looking for something more public. John fed off the Word of God and communion with God by the Spirit in the desert. John feasted on Isaiah, Malachi, and the prophets and the Word of God transformed him so thoroughly that when God did put him on display his simple words challenged even Roman soldiers.
G. John’s ministry was one of preparation – preparing the people for the coming of the Lord – and deep preparation is necessary for a preparation ministry. A forerunner must prepare themselves in a significant way to prepare others. It is a long building process because it is a time of building foundations. To be effective, foundations must be solid and they must be deep. Foundations like this take a long time and they are built below the ground, where others cannot see what God is doing.

H. John’s parents were aged when he was born and died while he will still young. The spirit of Elijah began to rest on John in the wilderness as John stood before the Lord and ministered to Him hidden away from the people. Just like Elijah, John would be formed and fashioned in an out of the way place and, like Elijah, he would appear suddenly on the stage of redemptive history. Like Elijah, John would confidently say that he stood before the Lord and this was the most important facet of his preparation and his ministry. The most important facet of your life and your ministry is whether or not you stand before the Lord.

1 And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.” (1 Kings 17:1 NKJV)

14 And Elisha said, “As the LORD of hosts lives, before whom I stand, surely were it not that I regard the presence of Jehoshaphat king of Judah, I would not look at you, nor see you. (2 Kings 3:14 NKJV)

7 “Thus says the LORD of hosts: ‘If you will walk in My ways, And if you will keep My command, Then you shall also judge My house, And likewise have charge of My courts; I will give you places to walk among these who stand here. (Zechariah 3:7 NKJV)

29 He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. (John 3:29 NKJV)

I. John’s life was in the desert. In the desert he lived in communion with God and a fire burned stronger and stronger in his inner man. The man that Jesus would call the “greatest born of woman” became stronger and stronger in spirit. For John the wilderness was the place for his inner man was fully alive as he stood before God and ministered to Him.

J. John was called to “go before the face of God” and therefore had to live before the face of God. John had to live as a priest, because he was about to confront the priesthood. No doubt John wept over the condition of Israel. In the same way, we have no right to confront the church until we have cried over it. Many try to speak as prophets simply because they have information about what is lacking, but speaking like John requires more than words. It requires the burden of the Lord and is received, carried, and expressed in the place of intercession – intercession for those who are in compromise.
K. You have to live before the face of God before you can speak as John spoke. In Luke 11:1 the disciples asked Jesus to teach them one thing: how to pray, and we have to recognize how they ended their question: “Teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” The disciples wanted one thing from Jesus – His prayer life – in the same way that John taught his disciples how to pray. That is a staggering evaluation of John's prayer life. Prayer was what John taught his disciples because it was his life.

L. John learned this lesson: Crowds are seducing, but the desert is where the first burns, the burning bush appears, and God speaks. He learned why Jesus was constantly retreating to the wilderness to pray (Matthew 14:23; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 5:16; 6:12; John 6:15). It is important to recognize that John never left the desert. Even when God put him on display, he ministered from the desert. No doubt he could have had bigger crowds in Jerusalem, but he did not want to leave the desert. It was his place of communion. It was his life. He was fully alive there. He did not stay because he was a social outcast, he stayed there because the desert had given him something in God that he knew he knew would be threatened if he left the desert.

76“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; For you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways, (Luke 1:76 NKJV)

80So the child grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his manifestation to Israel. (Luke 1:80 NKJV)

II. UNDERSTANDING THE DESERT

A. There is more than one kind of desert and it is critical to understand the difference in your own life in order to respond rightly because the goal is not always to leave the desert.

1. The desert of testing is a place of battle and it is temporary. Faith is tested here and refined and Jesus’ own life is one of the best examples. Jesus battled the devil in the wilderness when He was tempted and then emerged in power. The desert of testing is temporary and it is for the sake of war.

1Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, 2being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry. (Luke 4:1–2 NKJV)

14Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. (Luke 4:14 NKJV)

2. However, there is an entirely different kind of desert. It is the desert of communion. It is the place where God lovingly calls you to come away with Him to a place of communion. His voice calls, “come away with Me.” It is the place where God calls you away and detoxes you simply because He made you for Himself.

3. In His love songs over Israel, God always remembered how He betrothed her in the wilderness with deep emotion.
10 My beloved spoke, and said to me: “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away. (Song of Solomon 2:10 NKJV)

2 “Go and cry in the hearing of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD: “I remember you, The kindness of your youth, The love of your betrothal, when you went after Me in the wilderness, In a land not sown. (Jeremiah 2:2 NKJV)

8 “When I passed by you again and looked upon you [Israel in the wilderness], indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine,” says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 16:8 NKJV)

35 And I will bring you into the wilderness of the peoples, and there I will plead My case with you face to face. 36 Just as I pleaded My case with your fathers in the wilderness of the land of Egypt, so I will plead My case with you,” says the Lord God. (Ezekiel 20:35-36 NKJV)

14 “Therefore, behold, I will allure her, will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her. (Hosea 2:14 NKJV)

a. In the call to this wilderness, you should hear the burning emotions of God who is jealous for a relationship not possible in the midst of distraction and competing affections. This is part of the desert. Just as the stars seems more brilliant away from the lights of the city, so too the person of God burns most vividly in the place of the desert.

b. The children of Israel suffered in the wilderness after the Exodus only because of their disobedience. It was meant to be a place of tender encounter with God as He made covenant with them, but it became a place of hardship because of their disobedience.

c. It is meant to be the place where God removes all distractions and begins to form a vessel and this is the place where John lived. It is the place where John surrendered to the jealousy of YHWH over His life. John learned the lesson that we must: God will not share us. This is why believers are always miserable and frustrated when they walk in compromise. God is jealous. He will not share us with competing affections.

B. Jesus’ own life demonstrates His own understanding of both kinds of deserts. Jesus won a victory in the desert of testing and exited it with power, but His soul consistently yearned for and sought out the desert of communion with the Father. Jesus had cultivated something in the desert that His heart longed for and it was vital to His life and ministry.

16 So He Himself often withdrew into the wilderness and prayed. (Luke 5:16 NKJV)

12 Now it came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. (Luke 6:12 NKJV)
23 And when He had sent the multitudes away, He went up on the mountain by Himself to pray. Now when evening came, He was alone there. (Matthew 14:23 NKJV)

35 Now in the morning, having risen a long while before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed. (Mark 1:35 NKJV)

46 And when He had sent them away, He departed to the mountain to pray. (Mark 6:46 NKJV)

15 Therefore when Jesus perceived that they were about to come and take Him by force to make Him king, He departed again to the mountain by Himself alone. (John 6:15 NKJV)

C. Like Jesus, Moses would go outside the camp to commune with YHWH.

7 Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. (Exodus 33:7 NKJV)

D. We are obsessed with efficiency, but God is not. He is both urgent and patient all at the same time. John was a blaze of urgency for 6 months, but God nurtured and maintained that urgency for 30 years. In the same way, when God responded to Israel’s cries for deliverance from Egypt, He began by spending 80 years forming Moses to lead the people. The last 40 of those years He put Moses aside out in a desert.

1. God does not consider that kind of investment extravagant. Why? Because He didn’t form John only for 6 months of ministry. He formed John to minister to Him for a billion years. John will be proclaiming the glory of his cousin for billions of years. God is not forming us only for a ministry function. He is forming us to dwell with Him forever.

2. God values natural process and time more than we do. He makes men, individually and uniquely over time. He presses and forms them through the processes of life. He does not wring His hands in despair over the time that it takes to form a vessel. This is the biblical view of urgency.

3. Our view of urgency is that it must be done “now.” God’s view is very different because it is the magnitude of what is coming that demands urgency. God’s will address the magnitude of the challenge with equal magnitude. Therefore the proper response to urgency is to build things that will withstand the strength of what is coming. God does not do that overnight. He does it over decades. He usually moves more slowly than we like to prepare something that will endure the conflict.

E. As we have seen, when John’s ministry began he continued his life in the desert because he was a man of the desert. There he had a secret of communion of God. When John began preaching, he wasn’t burning to leave the desert; he was simply compelled by fire in his bones to proclaim the message that had come through a life of communion that he had cultivated for so many years. When this life was revealed to Israel (Luke 1:80), the people went out to hear him. In fact, John never left the desert until he was carried to jail and then executed.
9…But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not. (Jeremiah 20:9 NKJV)

5Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him (Matthew 3:5 NKJV)

7As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 8But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. 9But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. (Matthew 11:7–9 NKJV)

F. Though John’s life was in the desert and, no doubt, lonely at times, it was not the life of a hermit. He was faithful to minister to others in the desert. John actively taught and invested in a group of young men known as his disciples (Matthew 9:14, 11:2, Mark 2:18, Luke 5:33, 7:18–19, 11:1, John 1:35, 3:25, 4:1). While God cuts us off from many distracting things when He sends us to desert places, that is not the same as isolating ourselves from the body and refusing to engage with others. John was faithful in small things by leading a small group while God constrained the rest of his life.

1Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples.” (Luke 11:1 NKJV)

1Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John (John 4:1 NKJV)

III. JOHN BREAKS THE PROPHETIC SILENCE

A. As John ministered to the Lord in the desert, suddenly the Word of the Lord came to him in the wilderness.

1Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, 2while Annas and Caiaphas were high priests, the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness. (Luke 3:1–2 NKJV)

B. In an environment devoid of a prophetic voice and a counterfeit peace, a voice shattered the silence and a light burned brightly in the desert. Even the word shattered is too small to encapsulate all that John’s voice did. Suddenly the Word of God was alive in the midst of Israel again. The voice of the prophet had returned. You never have to advertise a fire. The people went out to see John, and the message he proclaimed, burning brightly in the desert. It was very symbolic that the people had to cross the Jordan to go hear John. Symbolically they were crossing outside the land of Israel back into the wilderness to hear the Word of the Lord just as their forefathers had. Israel was encountering her God again out in the desert and out of the land.

“In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!’” (Matthew 3:1-2 NKJV)
And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ” (Luke 3:3–6 NKJV)

28 These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (John 1:28 NKJV)

26 And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!” (John 3:26 NKJV)

1. John’s generation had endured a famine of hearing the word of God (Amos 8:11). God has done much in our generation, but there is a deep need for this kind of prophetic voice in our generation. Voices are desperately needed. We have many “echo’s,” but few voices. Like ancient Israel, the earth is again waiting to hear the prophetic shout across the nations.

2. As it was in John’s day the need is great, but you do not shatter the silence by trying to. You shatter it by abiding like John did in the hidden places. In the small places. In the deserts of communion. You shatter it by positioning yourself by lots of small decisions that set you apart to hear His voice.

C. John’s message was not unique. His sermon material was the Old Testament prophets. He repeated their exact message because he had soaked himself in the message over decades. In the wilderness, he became the prophetic messages that he read. The people heard the prophets read in the synagogues regularly, but there was something different in John’s preaching. Isaiah’s words were alive again because they were being declared by a man filled with the same Spirit that wrote the words. When John preached Scripture, it hit the hearts of John’s hearers like a sledgehammer.

3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’ ” (Luke 3:3–6 NKJV)

23 He said: “I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the LORD,’’ ” as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:23 NKJV)

1 We are not entirely sure where Bethbara is. This is not a reference to the well-known town of Bethany. Most likely Bethbara was a very small community.
1. Jesus put John in a specific place in redemptive history by telling the people that all the prophets had prophesied until John.

13 For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. (Matthew 11:13 NKJV)

2. In other words, the prophetic ministry was transitioning. What the prophets had longed for and prophesied John was announcing. God’s plan was not in motion. Messiah was imminent. John’s repeated God’s promises to the people and announced the beginning of their fulfillment and what those promises required of the people.