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~ **A Word in the Wilderness** ~

You can learn much more about this story by doing these three things:

1. Read the story in God’s Word.
2. Discover key cultural and historical insights.
3. Answer the reflective questions.

1. Read the story in God’s Word.

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Matthew 3:1-11	Mark 1:1-8	Luke 3:1-17	John 1:19-28
<p>In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, ²“Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near.” ³The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,</p> <p>“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”</p> <p>⁴John’s clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁵People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. ⁶And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River.</p> <p>⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he</p>	<p>This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began ²just as the prophet Isaiah had written:</p> <p>“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. ³He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”</p> <p>⁴This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate</p>	<p>It was now the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius, the Roman emperor. Pontius Pilate was governor over Judea; Herod Antipas was ruler over Galilee; his brother Philip was ruler over Iturea and Traconitis; Lysanias was ruler over Abilene. ²Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests. At this time a message from God came to John son of Zechariah, who was living in the wilderness. ³Then John went from place to place on both sides of the Jordan River, preaching that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁴Isaiah had spoken of John when he said,</p> <p>“He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him! ⁵The valleys will be filled, and the mountains and hills made level.</p>	<p>¹⁹This was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, “Who are you?” ²⁰He came right out and said, “I am not the Messiah.”</p> <p>²¹“Well then, who are you?” they asked. “Are you Elijah?”</p> <p>“No,” he replied.</p> <p>“Are you the Prophet we are expecting?”</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>²²“Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?”</p> <p>²³John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:</p> <p>“I am a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Clear the way for the LORD’s coming!’”</p> <p>²⁴Then the Pharisees who had been sent ²⁵asked him, “If you aren’t the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet,</p>

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<p>denounced them. "You brood of snakes!" he exclaimed. "Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. ⁹ Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ¹⁰ Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.</p> <p>¹¹ "I baptize with water those who repent of their sins and turn to God. But someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not worthy even to be his slave and carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.</p>	<p>locusts and wild honey.</p> <p>⁷ John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals.⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"</p>	<p>The curves will be straightened, and the rough places made smooth. ⁶ And then all people will see the salvation sent from God."</p> <p>⁷ When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ⁹ Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."</p> <p>¹⁰ The crowds asked, "What should we do?"</p> <p>¹¹ John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."</p> <p>¹² Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"</p> <p>¹³ He replied, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires."</p>	<p>what right do you have to baptize?"</p> <p>²⁶ John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. ²⁷ Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal."</p> <p>²⁸ This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing.</p>
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		<p>¹⁴“What should we do?” asked some soldiers.</p> <p>John replied, “Don’t extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay.”</p> <p>¹⁵ Everyone was expecting the Messiah to come soon, and they were eager to know whether John might be the Messiah. ¹⁶ John answered their questions by saying, “I baptize you with water; but someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ He is ready to separate the chaff from the wheat with his winnowing fork. Then he will clean up the threshing area, gathering the wheat into his barn but burning the chaff with never-ending fire.”</p>	
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2. Discover key cultural and historical insights.

- In antiquity, travel was a dangerous undertaking and considered deviant behavior except for feasts, visiting family, or business. The destination could also be viewed as deviant if it was outside the structured village and city and considered the haunt of demons. John, by withdrawing to the wilderness, withdraws from the established systems of his day as he waits for God’s word. Because of the dangers of the wilderness, people would naturally travel in groups, thus, the text tells us that multitudes came to hear John.
- John preached repentance because the kingdom of God was at hand. Repentance come from a Greek word that means to change one’s mind. In addition to baptism, John wanted the people to

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show their repentance by deeds of mercy and justice. This was the norm in the world of the Middle East.

- The kingdom of God was the promise that God would re-establish His reign upon the earth. It was the focus of prophecies and the longing for every Jew. Forgiveness was the initial blessing of the kingdom. The Greek word for forgiveness is the same as the word for a debt which was a pressing issue for multitudes of people in the time of Christ.
- John called the religious leaders a brood of vipers. There could be no higher insult as one's status in society was largely determined by one's family

Insights from Bruce J. Malina, A Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels.

3. Answer these reflective questions.

Read the prophecy of Malachi. How do you think these words encouraged those who read them? Would they have been an encouragement to you?

3:1-5 – “Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ²“But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. ³He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the LORD. ⁴Then once more the LORD will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

4:5-6 – ⁵“Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord arrives. ⁶His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

Read the prophecy of Isaiah. How do you think these words encouraged those who read them? Would they have been an encouragement to you?

Isaiah 40:3-5 – ³Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting, Clear the way through the wilderness for the LORD! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God! ⁴Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills. Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places. ⁵Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. The LORD has spoken!”

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The Jewish people waited hundreds of years for the promises to be fulfilled. What does this tell us about being patient for God’s work to be finished in the world and in our lives?

How can we prepare the way of the Lord in our lives?

John preached repentance and the kingdom of God. Repentance means to change one’s mind. The kingdom of God refers to the re-establishment of God’s reign on earth. Are there any areas in your life where you need to change your mind to get it more in line with God’s will? Are you submitted to God’s authority in your life?

Removing the sandals from someone’s feet was an act of the lowest of slaves. Yet, John said he was not worthy even for this task. Why do you think the prophet John was such a humble man? Is this your attitude toward Christ?

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