



Sermon

6/12/15

Prepare Straight Paths for the Lord

Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

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Luke tells us in those first 2 verses that these events were at a specific time – not made up, not a story which could be anytime – they are set in history.

The Word of the Lord came to John – this messenger Isaiah and Malachi had prophesied about. What had they said about him?

Malachi had said, “One would come who would prepare the way of the Lord.”

Isaiah said that a messenger would come from the desert and his message would be: Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths (worn track) before him. Every valley (ravine) shall be filled in; every mountain and hill made low.

The crooked (curved, perverse, wicked) roads shall become straight, the rough (rocky) into smooth ways.

Those descriptions distinguish between tracks and roads or ways. We saw plenty of rough tracks and roads in Tanzania.

- There were roads which were just worn tracks where cars had been.
- There were rivers and ravines to be crossed.
- There were mountains and hills.
- The Chinese were straightening and improving the main North-South road to make a highway.
- There were rough ways to be smoothed out.

How might we prepare a highway for the coming of the Lord into our hearts, our fellowship, our community, our nation? This is not just about preparing for Christmas; this is broader – it is preparing for the Kingdom of God. Jesus said, “Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [food, clothing, and shelter] will be given to you as well.”¹ Of course, you may say that you are already a follower of Jesus, you are already in the Kingdom. But the Kingdom is now and not yet. We all need to go deeper and seek further into God’s rule, righteousness and way.

What are the rough tracks in your heart or life? The mountains of pride or self-determination that need to be brought down? The ravines of doubt, self-hatred, despair that need to be lifted up? Maybe there is a rockiness in you which needs to be made smooth? Something which is bent out of shape which he would straighten? Is there a beaten track in your habits that needs to be corrected so that a new way is developed which is healthier and better?

Look at the photos and take time to think about that.

¹ Matthew 6:33



How's your heart?



I talked last week about the multiples fulfilments of prophecies, how the prophet seems to see corresponding future times overlaid and describes them together. Again, Malachi does that in his message. He looks forward to the messenger who prepares the way for the Lord to come to his temple. That is John the Baptist preparing the way of Jesus. But then he continues with the purifying work of Jesus which continues in the hearts of his followers from that day until the last day when there will be a great cleansing and purging. By his death on the cross, Jesus made the means of purifying available to those who trust him.

He brings a washing and a refining of hearts. Metal is purified by heat as it goes through the furnace. What cannot stand heat is washed with water and soap. So Malachi sees the Lord refining and washing to purify his people. There is a purifying or sanctifying through this life; there is a final wash up on the Day of the Lord.

The good news is that the Lord wants to save and purify his people. He is not trying to catch us out and reject us. If he were, he would neither warn nor engage in a purifying work. Even better, Paul tells us in Philippians 1:6 that he is confident that "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

What an assurance! When Jesus saves you, he starts a good work in your life and he fully intends to bring it through to completion. He is able to do it and he wills to do it. You may think there is not much change; you may be only too aware of faults and failings – but he is working in your life and in that great final Day he will bring to completion the perfecting of your life. You can be confident of it. You can trust him for that. So naturally, you want to cooperate with him not fight against his work in your life. But trust him that he is purifying you so he can present you as part of his people without spot or wrinkle at the Last Day.

Paul's prayer

Not only are we being purified but that flows out in love and righteousness. This is good stuff! Paul prays for us – for you! – "May your love abound more and more" – get wider and broader and greater. But is that feel good sentimentalism? Not at all, your love is to abound more in knowledge and depth of insight.

Why knowledge?

Alec Motyer helpfully points out that this knowledge is a hall mark of Christian growth.² It is necessary for us to come to salvation.

Romans 10:13-15 Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." ¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

Knowledge is the state of the fully grown Christian – remember in Ephesians Paul wrote of our growing "...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."³

Is Knowledge enough?

No Paul says our love is to abound in knowledge and depth of insight. This is moral discernment of what is best, pure and blameless. He doesn't use the word wisdom but it is the characteristic needed. Love without knowledge may be wildly astray. Knowledge without wisdom may be fatally flawed. Love needs direction and understanding so our actions are motivated by love but guided by understanding and discernment.

The Final Goal

As we continue to be purified by the Lord, our lives need to be filled with the goodness that comes from the righteousness which Jesus gives to us. And then washed and refined by the Lord, living lives which allow his love to flow out with understanding and wisdom, we will be to the praise and glory of God!

What a hope! What a destination! Will you allow that vision to grasp your heart and mind so that increasingly you live towards it?

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² Motyer, J., 1997, TBST: Philippians, IVP, p56

³ Ephesians 4:13