

## SM001 – A Word in the Wilderness

### Opening

You're listening to Stories of the Master.

The stories of Jesus have reached into the hearts of millions. They have changed people, families, and nations. Not all have loved the stories Jesus told. Not all have honored the life He lived. Some were angry with Him, the things He did and the things He said. Others were deeply moved and found hope. What will your response be?

Today is our inaugural broadcast of Stories of the Master – A Word in the Wilderness.

My name is Jonathan, and I will be your Storyteller and Teacher.

I'm so glad you're here. Gather your friends. Come close and listen. It's time for the world to hear again the stories of the Master.

## SM001 – A Word in the Wilderness

It all began in the strangest and wildest of places – the wilderness of Israel. The wilderness – who would go there except for shepherds looking for lost sheep, nomads en route from one camp site to another, bandits, wild animals, and prophets searching for a word from God.

The wilderness was outside the village and city, beyond the boundaries of civilization, and barren. The wilderness of Judea endlessly stretched with dry, chalky hills and impassible rocky gorges. Winters were cold, and summers hot.

But that's where it all began. In the wilderness of the Judean mountains where a prophet-like man, dressed in camel skins and eating nothing but locusts and honey had withdrawn from society, following his heart, following his vision, and listening for the word of the Lord. His name was John.

John was the honored son of the priest Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth. But he was not just any son. Like other children before him in the history of his people, his birth was special. Zacharias and Elizabeth were old – advanced in years. The hope of children had long since passed. The honor of passing on the family name was lost.

But one day old Zacharias had a vision, an angel, the angel Gabriel who stands directly in the presence of God appeared to him and said, "Zacharias, your prayers have been heard. You and Elizabeth will have a son and you will name him John. He will be filled with the Spirit of God while still in his mother's womb and he will be a great prophet in the spirit and power of Elijah preparing the people for the way of the Lord."

Those days seemed so long ago. Zacharias and Elizabeth had long since passed. And John had left his home in the pleasant Judean hill country for the desert, listening for a word in the wilderness.

<sup>1</sup> Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was tetrarch (ruler) of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch (ruler) of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias was tetrarch (ruler) of Abilene, <sup>2</sup> in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness. (nasb)

And when the word came to John it empowered him to do what Isaiah the prophet wrote about so long before:

"In the desert someone is shouting,

`Get the road ready for the Lord!

Make a straight path for him.

<sup>5</sup>Fill up every valley and level every mountain and hill.

Straighten the crooked paths and smooth out the rough roads.

<sup>6</sup>Then everyone will see the saving power of God.' " (ceV)

What a perfect description for a wilderness – crooked paths, rough roads, dangerous mountains and hills dropping suddenly into deep valleys. If you were to go into the Judean wilderness today, you better have a guide with you for it is so easy to get lost. This was the wilderness of Israel and this is where the prophet of the Lord first preached, and it was a fitting place because the wilderness was a picture of the moral and spiritual wilderness in which Israel and all the nations of the world found themselves.

The story tells us that God's word came to this prophet while Annas and Caiaphas were the leading priests of the people. These men are mentioned in Jewish writings and curses are pronounced upon them for their corruption. The Temple itself is pictured as speaking to them and ordering them to leave that holy place because of their defiling actions. No wonder John went to the wilderness. He wanted nothing to do with such deviant leaders who pretended to serve God.

What about the political world? Galilee was ruled by the wicked King Herod's son, Antipas, and Perea was ruled by another of his sons, Philip. Judea and Samaria were under the direct rule of Rome itself and led by the bribe-taking, violent-loving, Jew-hating Pontius Pilate.

Rome was the political and social center of the empire that oppressed Israel, not just by its military but by its sin. Rome was decadent. Two million people lived in Rome and half of these were slaves. Think of the place where you live. What would life be like if half the population of your village or town or city were slaves who existed for no other purpose than to serve the needs of their master? Would you be living in a place of justice? Slaves were often corrupt and a corrupting influence on the city. They were entirely unprotected by law. Sick or old slaves were simply discarded – no longer useful – put out on the curb for the garbage collection.

But what about the other half of the city of Rome? These would be citizens or foreigners but of this one million, 200,000 were supported at public expense and spent their time in nothing other than the pursuit of pleasure. Think again of the place where you live. What would life be like if a large portion of your village or city were unemployed and had no moral compass in life and no desire to find work but

lived only for the pleasure of the moment? Even the Roman philosopher Seneca, not necessarily a godly man himself, was horrified by what he saw. Would you want to live there?

Many lived in poverty. In antiquity, there were few provisions for the poor. There were no hospitals. There was no charity, no brotherly love, and if some did try to give alms to the poor, their actions were frowned upon. Abortion and the murdering of newborn infants or placing them on the hillsides to be eaten by wild animals was an accepted practice.

Perhaps religion was an answer. All religions were considered equal in the Roman Empire with this one requirement. The Romans insisted that everyone worship the emperor as a god. This man was deified as was his wives, mistresses, children, and animals. What kind of religion was that?

Superstition permeated society as well as divination, astrology, magic, and necromancy.

People prayed, but the kinds of prayers showed that selfishness ruled the day. One recorded prayer tells us of a man praying for the death of his rich relative. I guess he thought he was in the will. Another prayer is for the satisfaction of lust. So despairing were the people that blasphemies were placed on tombstones. On the tomb of one child were these words – “to the unjust gods who robbed me of life.” On the tomb of a 20 year old were these, “I lift up my hands against the god who took me away, innocent as I am.”

Well did Isaiah the prophet speak of this world when he said,

<sup>4</sup> The earth mourns and dries up,  
and the crops waste away and wither.  
Even the greatest people on earth waste away.

<sup>5</sup> The earth suffers for the sins of its people,  
for they have twisted God’s instructions,  
violated his laws,  
and broken his everlasting covenant.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore, a curse consumes the earth.  
Its people must pay the price for their sin.  
They are destroyed by fire,  
and only a few are left alive. Isa 24:4-6 nlt

The philosopher Seneca longed for some hand from outside to lift the world out of its mire. The Roman historian Tacitus said life was one big farce and under a curse.

And in this world, on the edge of the Roman Empire, in a remote part of wilderness, the word of the Lord came to John.

What was that word from God? And what is its message for you and me today?

## Interlude

I hope you are enjoying this first broadcast of Stories of the Master. This is Jonathan Williams and I'd like to let you know a little more about this ministry. Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, Speak where we desire to tell **the Story** of Jesus and the stories He told to the whole world. As you listen to these stories, it is our hope that you will want to learn more about Jesus, His Story, and what He came to do for you and the whole world. Check out our website at [Stories of the Master.com](http://StoriesoftheMaster.com) where you can find out this information.

You can also write to us at Stories - PO Box 90047 in SA TX 78209 in the U.S. That's Stories - PO Box 90047 in SA TX 78209 in the U.S.

One of the stories Jesus told we have already put into book form. It is called The Prodigal Son and His Prodigal Father. Just go to our Resources page at [Stories of the Master.com](http://StoriesoftheMaster.com) and you will find everything you need to obtain this important book on one of the most powerful stories Jesus told. On the Resources page you will also learn how to obtain a CD of today's message. You'll find it all at [StoriesoftheMaster.com](http://StoriesoftheMaster.com)

Well, so far, we have seen that a prophet was waiting in the wilderness for a word from the Lord. Let's go back to our story – A Voice in the Wilderness – and find out what God said to him and what he did with that message. Was it a message only for the prophet, or, was it a message for us as well?

## Part 2

'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming!

Clear the road for him!

<sup>5</sup> The valleys will be filled,  
and the mountains and hills made level.

The curves will be straightened,  
and the rough places made smooth.

<sup>6</sup> And then all people will see  
the salvation sent from God.'" Nlt

When the world was in decay and desperate need, when the people of God were oppressed not only by Rome but also led astray by their own rulers, the word of God came to the prophet.

I hope that encourages you as much as it encourages me for no matter how bad conditions get, God is not defeated. God will always raise up His prophets and can will always shine His light in the darkness and break through the silence with His voice of power. No, God is not defeated. He has an answer and that answer is His word through His spokesmen for a world in need. It always had been and always will be.

This story of a word in the wilderness, the message of the prophet John instructs us about the great conflict in the world and the opposing sides in the conflict. On the one side is self-satisfaction and

corruption, political maneuvering, struggles for power, the deification of sinful man, and tyranny. On the other side is God's word in the hands of His servants.

There is Rome with all of its wealth, its organization, its power, its invincible army of might. It stands unmatched by any other nation. But He who sits in the heavens laughs. Does God fret? No. Does He raise an army that can, hopefully, conquer Rome? No. What does God do? He whispers His words to one in the wilderness – "it's time. Prepare the way of the Lord."

That speaks to me. That stirs me deeply for it tells me to re-consecrate myself to the word of the Lord and to be a light in His hands to shine into the darkness of our day. It tells me to proclaim His word to you so that together we might be a light in our world where the darkness is deep.

That's what John did. He left his village and went to the wilderness, away from everything that he might hear the voice of God in order to proclaim it to the world. But when he spoke the word of the Lord, what was a whisper to Him was a **thunderous voice** to the people of God calling them to repentance.

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist came to the Judean wilderness and began preaching. His message was, <sup>2</sup> "Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near." <sup>3</sup> The prophet Isaiah was speaking about John when he said,

"He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming!  
Clear the road for him!'"

<sup>4</sup> John'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. <sup>5</sup> People from Jerusalem and from all of Judea and all over the Jordan Valley went out to see and hear John. <sup>6</sup> And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. Mt 3:1-6, nlt

"The kingdom is at hand." What a message! The Lord is coming in fulfillment of prophecy. We have seen the rule of the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans but now God's reign is coming to earth. God is going to exercise His authority and power in unparalleled ways on earth and the great events that will decide the final outcome of this ages-old battle between God and the dark spiritual forces behind rebellious man will be decided. The destiny of every man and every nation will be determined.

The ravines will be filled up.

The mountains and hills will be brought low.

The crooked places will be straightened.

The rough roads will be smoothed.

Multitudes flocked to hear John and to be baptized by him. Because the wilderness was a dangerous place, they would travel in groups. Country peasants from Judea and artisans from Jerusalem would come and confess their sins. They wanted to be ready for the coming of the Lord. And with the rainy season over, the Jordan would be full of warm water and would provide many places where John could baptize.

Another group came with these humble people. The religious elite. We know them from the Story as Pharisees and Sadducees.

<sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming to watch him baptize, he denounced them. “You brood of snakes!” he exclaimed. “Who warned you to flee God’s coming wrath?”

A brood of snakes! No greater insult could be hurled at these men. People’s honor and status in the ancient world was largely determined by the family into which one was born and here, John, is calling them, literally, the offspring of snakes

*“How could John say such a thing to us?” they must have thought. “Doesn’t he know we are sons of the great man of God, the great prophet of God, the friend of God, Abraham!” But John knew what was going on in their minds and he said*

*“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. Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.” Don’t think that just because you are a physical son of Abraham that you have a pass with God. God knows your hearts. God knows your thoughts. God watches you when you think no one is looking.*

*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.*

Those are powerful words! And we sometimes summarize them all with one word – repent! The word repent, and I will tell you this many times so get used to it, the word repent means, “to change your mind.” That’s a simple enough definition, but don’t let the simplicity fool you. It means that God tells us that the way we have been thinking about life, about reality, about eternity is wrong. It means we are basing our life on a false way of thinking and a false way of living.

That was the problem for the Pharisees and Sadducees. They said, *“I’m a son of Abraham. God made a promise to Abraham that his children would inherit the land. So, because I am of the family of Abraham, I’m safe.”*

But John told them, *“No, you are not safe. Being a physical child of Abraham doesn’t mean anything. God can create sons of Abraham out of these stones if he wanted to. What matters is if you have the heart of Abraham. If you love God as he did. If you walk by faith as he walked by faith.*

*And if you don’t, 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. 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.”*

What did the Pharisees and Sadducees think about that! As we move further into the Stories of the Master they will show up again and it won’t be pretty. Most did not repent.

But, oh, the common people repented.

The crowds asked, "What should we do?"

<sup>11</sup> John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."

<sup>12</sup> Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"

<sup>13</sup> He replied, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires."

<sup>14</sup> "What should we do?" asked some soldiers.

John replied, "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay."

In the ancient world, people understood that true repentance was not just an individual action between a person and God but it led to a social action between him and others. If a man truly repented, his life would change and it would show itself in his conduct towards others and his justice with the poor.

And, so it is, today, with us. The word of the Lord is still resounding through the voice of his messengers telling the people to change their way of their thinking, to let go of their false hopes, to turn from their sins, to embrace the way of truth and light, and to show it in the way they live.

What about you? If you had been living in that day, what group would you have sided with? Would you have sided with the Pharisees and Sadducees who were defensive, who made excuses, and who refused to be baptized, confessing their sins? Or, would you have sided with those who were out of excuses and who threw themselves upon the mercy of God, who made their crooked paths straight and who made a way for the Lord to enter their lives?

I hope you will think deeply about the options before you and that you will choose wisely. The world is a dark place, but you have a chance to turn from darkness to light and to be a light for others in darkness if you will listen to this word in the wilderness.

The story comes to a close with these words.

<sup>15</sup> Now while the people were in a state of expectation and all were wondering in their hearts about John, as to whether he was the Messiah, <sup>16</sup> John answered and said to them all, "As for me, I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals and remove them from His feet. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

One was coming John said and this person was so powerful, so majestic, so holy that even John himself, this great prophet of God was not worthy to bend down and remove the sandals from his feet.

Removing the sandals from someone's feet was the work of the lowliest slave. But John, the prophet, the holy man of God was not worthy to perform this menial service. Who was this man that was coming? What was His name? Why was He so powerful? And what would He do?

Join us next week as we answer these all important questions. Join us next week for another “Story of the Master.”

### **Closing**

I really hope you enjoyed today’s story – A Word in the Wilderness. As you can see, it is the first of many with so much more coming.

The message of John is a message all of us need to hear, a message of repentance, a message of turning from self and from sin and turning back to God. Have you done this? Have you turned from your ways to embrace the way of the Lord? Have you prepared the way of the Lord in your heart? Have you let him reduce your mountains of pride and lift you out of your valleys of shame? Are you letting Him make the crooked paths straight?

If you would like more information about how to do this, how to repent, how to let the Lord into your life and let Him have His loving way with you, then write to us as Stories of the Master – PO Box 90047 – SA TX 78290 in the U.S. That’s Stories of the Master PO Box 90047 – SA TX 78209. You can also email us. Our address is [Stories@StoriesoftheMaster.com](mailto:Stories@StoriesoftheMaster.com). And don’t forget to check out our website for more information about today’s message and how you can receive a copy of it.

Stories of the Master is a ministry of Word of God, Speak where we take the truth of God’s Word and apply it to advance life change, build a biblical worldview, and connect people to the Story of God.

Our mission in telling the Story of Jesus and the stories He told is supported by the generous gifts of listeners like you who want to spread His message of grace and love to the whole world. It is indeed time for the world to hear again the Stories of the Master. We hope you will join us in this great mission. Write out your tax-deductible gifts to Word of God Speak or just, WGS, and send them to us at PO Box 90047 in SA, TX 78209. You can also donate online at [StoriesoftheMaster.com](http://StoriesoftheMaster.com)

We look forward to your joining us next week for another edition of Stories of the Master. Until then may the Master Himself bless you with His grace and peace.