

*Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Permission to Live

Matthew 11:2-11

² John the Baptist, who was now in prison, heard about all the things the Messiah was doing. So he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, ³ “Are You really the Messiah we’ve been waiting for, or should we keep looking for someone else?”

⁴ Jesus told them, “Go back to John and tell him about what you have heard and seen – ⁵ the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor. ⁶ And tell him: ‘God blesses those who are not offended by Me.’”

⁷ When John’s disciples had gone, Jesus began talking about him to the crowds. “Who is this man in the wilderness that you went out to see? Did you find him weak as a reed, moved by every breath of wind? ⁸ Or were you expecting to see a man dressed in expensive clothes? Those who dress like that live in palaces, not out in the wilderness. ⁹ Were you looking for a prophet? Yes, and he is more than a prophet. ¹⁰ John is the man to whom the Scriptures refer when they say,

‘Look, I am sending my messenger before You,
and he will prepare Your way before You.’

¹¹ “I assure you, of all who have ever lived, none is greater than John the Baptist. Yet even the most insignificant person in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he is!”

Let me paint a picture of the scene from which we read: A dungeon. Dark. Damp. Cold at night. Steaming hot through the day. Lifeless. Hopeless. Fetters and chains – with no escape.

Have you ever felt yourself trapped in such a predicament?

God’s servant, the one described in the bible “without equal” was shut away and cut off from the world. I’m talking about John the baptizer. From his remote jail cell John wondered if his purpose, his call from God, had been off-track.

It may be natural for us to wonder whether our perception or understanding of God was clear and correct, when the circumstances around us seem so *dismal*. John begins to wonder, while lying on the side-lines wasting away, “Did I mess up? Am I being punished? Did I fail God in some way?”

Wouldn’t you think that? Landing in jail, John must’ve felt like he was being *punished* by God. If we had honored God rightly, surely we should expect better conditions surrounding us? †

Sending word through “informants” for his own personal report, John received the message from Jesus: “**Tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at Me.**”

Is this what John expected from God’s Savior?

Perhaps John thought he would be at His right hand; to be in the fray, in the fight, in the mix for the Kingdom of God!

But he feels abandoned, reliving this message from his informants – for what else is he to do but rehearse and rehearse what they reported. He’s rather restricted in his activities – John has to make sense of it. “The poor have good news delivered to them?” Where does that fit with our expectations for *Messiah*? It sounded like Jesus was running a clinic; a hospital! Is that what John anticipated?

I wonder how long it was before John was able to link this concept of the Messiah’s

mission to the prophecy. Isaiah brings an image of renewal to creation when he describes the Messiah's purpose. The Messiah will redeem life in every way – spiritually, physically, mentally, and emotionally!

READING Isaiah 35:1-10

¹ Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers. ² Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon, as lovely as Mount Carmel's pastures and the plain of Sharon. There the LORD will display His glory, the splendor of our God.

³ With this news, strengthen those who have tired hands, and encourage those who have weak knees. ⁴ Say to those who are afraid, "Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you." ⁵ And when He comes, He will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. ⁶ The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. ⁷ The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land. Marsh grass and reeds and rushes will flourish where desert jackals once lived.

⁸ And a main road will go through that once deserted land. It will be named the Highway of Holiness. Evil-hearted people will never travel on it. It will be only for those who walk in God's ways; fools will never walk there. ⁹ Lions will not lurk along its course, and there will be no other dangers. Only the redeemed will follow it. ¹⁰ Those who have been ransomed by the LORD will return to Jerusalem, singing songs of everlasting joy. Sorrow and mourning will disappear, and they will be overcome with joy and gladness.

Do you understand the connection between the power of Christ and the ancient testimony? Isaiah predicted the Messiah would restore life to a barren desert, a wilderness wasteland! Did you hear the powerful, descriptive words:

¹ **Even the wilderness will rejoice in those days.**

The desert will blossom with flowers. (There's the anticipation of life and color!)

² **Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers**

and singing and joy! (Listen to the power of God's renewal with the image of praise!)

³ **strengthen those who have tired hands,**

and encourage those who have weak knees.

⁴ **Say to those who are afraid, "Be strong, and do not fear,**

for your God is coming to destroy your enemies.

He is coming to save you."

The prophecy isn't describing a real desert landscape. Jesus Christ is recovering lost souls locked in dungeons of distress and pain, those suffering misery over their past; releasing you from your agony! The goodness and glory of God that comes with Christ transforms the desert of the soul, bringing energy and life! He strengthens weak hands and makes firm our feeble prayers! God wants to enrich your spirit and soul!

Does this image arouse hope for you? Oh, I hope so.

Unfortunately, some of us need more than permission to live free! Some of us live with such negative messages, internal messages; it's so hard to find relief. Perhaps you've been the victim of someone else's *evil*. Or you made a decision in haste years ago that haunts you still. The voice of *guilt* accuses you with constant condemnation. You've come to believe that every bad thing that happens in your life – to you or to those you love – is punishment from God!

But that's not who God is. The bible declares God to be the One who brings music to the

soul! God splashes color across our spirit; He brings us faith and hope and joy! **The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon.** (vs. 2)

Forgiveness. Acceptance. Love are His constant gifts, offering you *relief*.

It's His enemy who enslaves and deceives us with lies!

Guilt drives some to drink. But just as bad, guilt drives others to work and perform! Did you know that? We rarely see the compulsive, driven, perfectionist as one who is offensive. Do you know what I'm talking about? Those who *get things done*, the good workers, can be driven by a sense of insecurity – trying and hoping to please everyone, but never feeling as though they measure up. The perfectionist or the workaholic can appear so virtuous on the outside; we admire their energy, we applaud their efforts – but many work from out of a self-nagging conscience, trying to earn reward and win approval. They are driven by unnecessary guilt. I've been trapped in that pattern in the past.

Transfer the condition of that troubled soul to the spiritual life: We would find a Christian who continues to feel guilty even after confessing their sins time and time again. They don't believe in grace, they can't accept forgiveness. They believe they have to "earn" acceptance, and they're trapped in cycles of *efforts* and *more efforts*.

You'll never see them blossom with life or sparkle with color and music and power in Christ – because they seem to hold God's free grace at arms length, as if saying: "No; not yet!" They resemble the "desert" from Isaiah's story. God offers a gift, but here's the one who feels guilty saying, "No, don't give to me – until I've offered you something in return! I don't deserve it! Let me do something worthy! Let me earn it!"

You may realize that *you* relate to God with very negative feelings or ideas. Where do you go with that? What will you do?

Bess was in that predicament. With her spiritual guide, she was asked to record notes that reflected her attitude of God. Some of her notes exposed her deepest perceptions of God: God is

- unloving in the human sense of the word *love*
- ready to pounce on moral errors
- two thousand years away from me
- a figment of somebody's imagination
- laughing at us

Imagine what it must be like to live under this belief system! "Joy to the world?" Hardly!

She was challenged by her guide: "This picture of God is not what people you know and respect think of Him. Who's right, do you think?"

"If you want an honest answer, I think I am."

Her mentor persisted: "Bess, how many of the attributes you've listed for God could be applied to your father?"

Bess was a stout farm wife out of the old tradition. She was a no nonsense sort of lady, not given to emotional outbursts. But tears glistened as the truth struck home. Her weeping eyes said *all of them* although she spoke no word. She paused a minute or two to regain her composure. "God's not at all like my father, is He?"

"Not a bit. In fact, let's make a list of opposites." With a little help, the truth about God started to appear, and when Bess went back to the Bible with a mind and heart cleared of the old negative messages, God's goodness, compassion, comfort, and love came through. (*Love Is A Choice*; pg. 244-245)

When the prophet Isaiah wrote these words about the transformation of the desert, he was referring to the transformation of our dry, desert hearts. So listen to the promise of God's healing: **"The wilderness will rejoice in those days. The desert will blossom with flowers.**

Yes, there will be an abundance of flowers and singing and joy! The deserts will become as green as the mountains of Lebanon...” A promise from God to you! That which was dead – will come to life! A place that was *not* glad – shall be glad! **“Be strong, and do not fear, for your God is coming to destroy your enemies. He is coming to save you.”**

God has come to destroy your guilt, your shame, your enemies – within, and your enemies outside, those who overpowered you with abuse.

Jesus said to those who believed in Him: “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free ...Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.” (John 8:31-32, 36)

No truth is more glorious to imprisoned people than to be told that they are no longer condemned but are set free! Christ brings that good news.

However, believers who have been set free still keep themselves behind bars. They feel guilty about their past, or guilty that they cannot be perfect in this life.

Let’s find a way to deal with unnecessary guilt, guilt that doesn’t belong, guilt for which you’re not responsible! Here are six strategies to take home with us today:

Accept Christ and His Forgiveness – This is so basic for us, but it is the foundation of our relationship with the Father. We’ve all committed sin. We’re all guilty. Christ died to pay for our sins. Were your sins so extraordinary that God required something more than His perfect solution in order to love you?

There is nothing you do that adds to or “compliments” the sacrifice of Christ on the cross!

Many Christians know the concept of “forgiveness.” They believe it; just not for them.

So just in case you need the encouragement, *you are forgiven!* “As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our transgressions from us.” (Psalm 103:12-14)

Challenge Inappropriate Thinking – All of us, all of humanity makes mistakes. Punishing yourself is such a horrible project. It is inappropriate and unacceptable for you to keep thinking, “I can never be forgiven”; “There is no corrective action I can take now”; “I am the most horrible person in the world.” This kind of thinking needs to be challenged. Like the exercise with Bess, we all need to re-imagine the truth of the gospel: “God can forgive me”; “I can do better”; “God can help me deal with this”; “God still loves me.”

Share Your Guilty Feelings – Find an appropriate person and share where you feel guilty. Don’t carry the feelings alone. The mind and body were not built to withstand the stress of guilt. (Psalm 32:3-5) “Before I confessed my sins, my bones felt limp, and I groaned all day long. Night

and day Your hand weighed heavily on me, and my strength was gone as in the summer heat. So I confessed my sins and told them to You. I said, ‘I will confess each of my sins to the Lord,’ and You forgave me and took away my guilt.”

Take Action for Reconciliation – Ask for forgiveness if you’ve wronged someone. Seek forgiveness, first from God. He promised, where you knock and ask, He will answer. One of the most difficult tasks for those plagued by guilt is to *accept* God’s forgiveness. But forgiveness is a gift! That’s the whole mystery, power and awe of Christ at Bethlehem! Grace is an undeserved gift! But God wants you to be free, so He came to set you free! Will you accept His gift?

And will you *grant* forgiveness to others?

Avoid Future Sin and the Resulting Guilt – In order to free yourself from any more burdens of guilt, do as Christ directed the woman caught in adultery: “Go, and sin no more.”

Capitalize on Positive Behavior Practices – Our bad feelings and “inappropriate”

thinking, or negative thinking, can be “persuaded” by good behavior and positive action. To some degree we program our mind when we stay active with good deeds. We’re not doing good in order to earn a reward. We’re doing good because we identify with the goodness of God!

[INVITATION] Is the Spirit of God speaking to you with the promise of life blossoming from the desert? Can you see the *color* of faith and hope in Christ? Have you found the *power* of His love? The transformation of a desert landscape anticipated by prophecy is *reality* with what God wants to bring to your mind and heart!

Some of you will need help recovering from habits that have been like addictions to you. The tough work recovering from routines that have imprisoned us may take more than a song and a prayer; even more than the moment of surrender and conversion. There are more steps on the journey as God leads us through the pain of the past.

But we begin today, thanking God for His grace to lift us out of bondage so that we are free! We begin with faith – believing God loves me! And believing He is able to make something new in my heart and mind! Hallelujah!

Listen to this closing commentary that magnifies the desire of God for you:

Let the stable still astonish:

straw, dirt floor, dull eyes,
dusty flanks of donkeys, oxen;
crumbling, crooked walls;
no bed to carry that pain.

And then, the child,

rag-wrapped, laid to cry
in a trough.

Who would have chosen this?

Who would have said: “Yes,

let the God of all the heavens and earth
be born here, in this place”?

Who but the same God

who stands in the darker, fouler rooms
of our hearts
and says, “Yes,
let the God of heaven and earth
be born here
in this place.”

– Leslie Leyland Fields