



BETHEL
PRESBYTERIAN

MINISTRY OF THE WORD

Volume 17 Issue 1

January 7, 2018

We have before us today the mission and ministry of John the Baptist. It's important for us to understand his ministry as John marks the beginning of a new era in redemptive history. John the Baptist is a transitional figure that we see at the beginning of the book of Mark. In fact, John the Baptist marks the beginning of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. John's primary role was that of a forerunner or that of a Herald.

In Mark 1, we see that John the Baptist was an ordained minister, or an ordained messenger sent from God to prepare the way for the Christ. He was sent before Jesus to prepare the way for Him and His ministry. Here Mark describes this as preparing the way. Mark further explains that in the Book of Isaiah it says "that every Valley should be lifted up and every Hill should be brought down."

The picture here is that of a broad plain of a highway that is easy to pass along. No doubt if you've lived in Colorado for any amount of time you've probably had the opportunity to go to the mountains. When one hikes or drives in the mountains, you find right away that the mountains are not easy to cross. They're not easy to travel in compared to the hiking or driving in the plains. Take Baseline Road for example. If you're familiar with Baseline Road you know that east of the mountains out on the plain, it's a pretty straight shot. It's a pretty straight road and traffic permitting, you can drive on it fairly easily. But if you take it all the way west, the moment you hit the mountains it becomes a steep mountain road with sharp turns and switchbacks. Here it's no longer easy to drive on, you have to drive with care, you have to drive slowly because it is difficult to pass.

The Ministry and mission of John the Baptist was to remove the mountains to remove the valleys to remove the hills to make a wide plain for the Savior to trot upon when he arrived in his ministry. Now obviously this is all a metaphor. He was not called to hire a corps of engineers. He was not hired to change the topography of ancient Palestine. He was not called to build actual roads or highways. John's calling was to prepare a people for the Lord.

This refers to the hearts of men and women as we see from the angel Gabriel when he announced the birth of John to Zacharias his father. The angel said that John would come in the spirit and power of Elijah in order to prepare a people to be ready for the Lord. And the way he did this was to call men to repentance.

That was the message of John the Baptist. He was to call the people of God to repentance and that is the central truth that I would like us to glean as we work our way through this passage together. You should be ready for the Lord by repenting of your sins. You should be ready for the Lord by repenting of your sins.

We'll look at this passage in three parts. The first will be the mission of the Herald found in verses one through three. The next will be the ministry of the Herald in verses four through six. And then finally the Herald's master in verses 7 and 8. If you have your bulletin you can pull it out. There's an outline for you to follow along.

We will see the Herald's mission; the Herald's ministry and the Herald's master.

So let's look now at the Herald's mission. In verse 1 says the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Notice the timing of the Herald's mission. It was the beginning of the gospel that John, as I have stated already, that marked the advent of a new era in the life of the people of God. It says that the law and the prophets were preached until John came but from John the kingdom of God was proclaimed.

When the Apostles sought a replacement for Judas they sought one who had been with them from the beginning and they described that as the Ministry of John the Baptist all the way up to the time that Jesus was taken again into heaven. And this isn't the beginning of the gospel in the sense of its Proclamation. The gospel was proclaimed to Adam in the Garden of Eden. The gospel was proclaimed to Noah as Noah was the inheritor of the righteousness which is by faith. The gospel was proclaimed to Abraham. It was proclaimed to Moses and he was proclaimed to the prophets.

So this isn't the first time the first mention of the gospel, but is the beginning of its fulfillment. John ushered in the age of the gospel, that eschatological time that the prophets had spoken about when God would bring about his salvation through the Messiah.

Notice the object of his preaching; it's the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the gospel, Jesus is he object of all true gospel preaching. Christ is the good news. Jesus is the gospel. Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Jesus was a common name in in ancient Palestine. Josephus mentions over 20 people with the name *Jesus*. It was a common name, but it was one that was especially fitting for the Lord Jesus Christ because it was given to Him by the angel when he said that His name shall be called Jesus because He will save his people from their sins.

The name Jesus means Yahweh is salvation, or Jehovah saves. Jesus is the Savior, but it also says He's the Christ. Christ is not his last name, Christ is a title it means The Anointed One. If you remember in in ancient times, there were three primary offices, in ancient Israel in which somebody would undergo a special rite before they entered into that office. It was the office of the Prophet, the office of the priests, and the office of the king.

Before someone would enter into that office they would go through the rite of having oil poured upon their head. This anointing symbolized that they had been set apart for this specific task. Jesus who is the Christ, is our prophet our priest, and our King both in His estate of humiliation and His estate of exaltation.

Jesus Christ is the Prophet, He is the priest, He is the king. But Mark also says, He is the son of God. That Jesus Christ is God, refers to His divine nature. It is a messianic title as well, but as we will see, that this One who is to come is none other than God Himself.

So John the Baptist was sent on a mission to prepare the way for Jesus and to proclaim the gospel. And his mission was predicted. His mission was spoken of in the prophets as it says here in verse 2. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet.

“Behold I send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight>”

This is actually a combination two, possibly three, prophecies from the Old Testament. Verse 2 is taken most likely from Malachi chapter 3. And verse 3 is taken from Isaiah 40. But some would also see that Exodus 23 is woven in here somehow where God told the children of Israel that He would send His messenger, He would send His angel ahead of them in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. But it most certainly is the prediction given in Malachi chapter 3 that before the Christ would come, before Jesus would come, there would first be a Herald. There would first be a messenger who had come to prepare His way and to proclaim His coming.

And this is important for us to understand because John did not just come out of nowhere with this message. There are prophets who are false prophets who later come and say that they have a message from God, men like Muhammad or men like Joseph Smith who come out of nowhere without any prediction and say that they are messengers of God. They are false prophets!

John the Baptist was predicted in the Old Testament. The prophet Malachi, the prophet Isaiah both said a messenger is coming, a messenger is coming to prepare the way. And if we look at his purpose, I've already mentioned that his purpose is to prepare the way which means to prepare the hearts of the people. But it's interesting as we look at these prophecies in a little more detail to see exactly whose way he was preparing.

There's something that could easily be lost in the translation here. And it's in verse 3. Here we read that the voice of one crying in the wilderness says, “make ready the way of the Lord.” Make ready the way of the LORD.

There was a custom amongst the ancient Jews that they would not pronounce the sacred name of God, they would not pronounce the name Yahweh. There's four letters in the in the Hebrew script that are written that expressed the name of God. And a Jew of ancient times, and the Jews of modern times will not pronounce that name. They will not pronounce those letters but instead when they read across it in Hebrew they simply say “Adonai.” “Adonai” is the Hebrew word for Lord.

This custom goes so far back that even when the translators, the Jews who were called upon to translate the scriptures from Hebrew into Greek, this custom was already in place. So instead of trying to transliterate the Hebrew pronunciation into Greek they simply wrote the Greek word for Lord. And whether you realize it or not, this custom is still happening in your English Bibles. In the English Bible when you read in the Old Testament you will see many times that the word Lord is spelled with a capital “L,” a capital “O,” a capital “R,” and a capital “D.” And whether you realize it or not, every time you see capital “LORD” it is the name Yahweh. It's the

name Jehovah in the Hebrew.

So why am I belaboring this point? Why am I speaking to you about Hebrew letters and capital "L's," capital "O'," capital "R," and capital "D's"? Because if you were to go and look in Isaiah 40 verse 3 when it speaks of John the Baptist's and it says "the voice of one crying in the wilderness make ready the way of the Lord" you would see it is a capital "L," capital "O," a capital "R," and a capital "D."

Do you understand the significance of this that John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for none other but God Himself. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh.

That John the Baptist was sent on a mission as a herald for none other than God Himself. Yahweh himself. As Jesus said in John 15:27, "before Abraham was I am">

This is the mission of John the Baptist, to prepare the way for God.

And I ask you today, are you ready to meet God? Have you prepared your heart to meet your Maker? To meet the Lord if He should call you this day? If He should call your soul into account are you ready are you ready to meet the Lord? Are you are you ready to meet the One who is, and who was, and who is to come?

I hope and pray that you are but if you are not, you will hear now the way to make yourself ready to prepare your heart to meet the Master.

As we look at the ministry of John the Baptist as we look at the herald's ministry and verses 4 through 6 we see how John called the people to prepare their hearts and to be ready. We see in verse 4 that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It showed us that the location of John's ministry. He appeared in the wilderness. In the scriptures, the wilderness is a special meeting place between God and His people. It's a special place where God draws near to his people.

Recalls the time when God first called his people out of Egypt. This is the place where the people of ancient Israel expressed their love for God. In Jeremiah 17:13 we read of the devotion of their youth and the love of their betrothal.

So when John the Baptist appears in the wilderness it's a call to return, it's a call to return to the to the to the devotion of youth. John the Baptist is preaching return to God to draw near to Him.

It's significant that John appears in the wilderness and it's significant that he calls the people out to the wilderness because it means that they had to acknowledge this somewhere along

the way that they had turned away from the Lord. Somewhere along the way they had missed the way, they had turned into their own way, and they had left the God of their youth, they had left the love of their God and begun to walk in their own ways.

So the wilderness is a call to return. And we see that also in his proclamation in the preaching of a baptism of repentance, the message of John the Baptist was to repent. He said “repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

Repentance in the New Testament is described as a change of mind. It's a change of mind about who God is and who you are. It is a change of mind about who Christ is and what sin is, but it's not simply a change of mind. It's not only something that happens in in your cognitive thinking, but it's also something that calls for action.

The Hebrew concept of repentance in the Old Testament, is the concept of turning. The word to turn means to turn from your sin, to turn to God. Paul described this to the Thessalonians when he said that they had turned from their idols to serve the living and true God.

Here John appears preaching a baptism of repentance.

Now, speaking about John's baptism, what was it? Many think it was proselyte baptism that occurred in ancient times if you wanted to convert from a Gentile and wanted to become a Jew. You would undergo a ceremony of a baptism that you would have to renounce being a Gentile and you would enter in to Judaism. This is significant because if it is in any way related to proselyte baptism it would require a tremendous amount of humility for a Jew to undergo this because in essence what John would be saying is that you are no better in the sight of God than a Gentile, that you need to repent of your sins. You cannot trust in your lineage, do not trust that you are a child of Abraham, but you need to repent your sins and enter into the covenant community all over again.

But there are many who do point out that proselyte baptism was self-administered and in this baptism John is the one who administers the baptism. It's also noted by many that John's baptism was not Christian baptism. We see that in Acts 19 when the Apostle Paul re-baptized those who had received the baptism of John. When Paul meets the disciples of John, he asked them into which baptism into what were they baptized? They said they were baptized into the baptism of John. Then Paul proclaimed the gospel to them said that “John told you to believe in one who is to come” and then Paul baptizes them in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So John's baptism is not exactly Christian baptism, though it certainly symbolizes many of the things that are symbolized in a Christian's baptism. Neither could it be a Christian baptism if it is a proselyte baptism, so it's most likely something unique. It's a unique baptism in that it was

a unique calling, it was a unique rite calling the people to repentance to have their sins forgiven.

In Mark 1:4, it says it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So we do need to be careful when we read that it is a baptism for the of repentance, for the forgiveness of sins because on the surface it might read as if one repents and that the forgiveness of sins comes automatically; as if repentance, apart from faith in the person and work of Christ somehow earns the forgiveness of sins. We need to know brothers and sisters, that the scriptures are clear; the forgiveness of sins comes from the Lord Jesus Christ, that repentance is a gift from God, it is something that God works in you. It is it is an evangelical grace, just as faith is a gift of God, it's something that He gives to you but the calling is still there for each and every one of us to repent.

Now, let's look at the reception of John's baptism. Mark 1:5, says in all the country of Judea was going out to him and all the people of Jerusalem and they were being baptized by by him in the Jordan River , confessing their sins.

Oftentimes we read of the Jews in the scriptures and there's almost a negative connotation a negative tone especially in in the Gospel of John. But here we see a positive response on the part of the people of Judea and the people of Jerusalem. They were going out to John in the wilderness and again, we should note the humility involved in this. Typically, pilgrims were going up to Jerusalem, here we see pilgrims going out from Jerusalem, they were leaving Jerusalem.

It's significant that John had called them out to the wilderness. It's as if he were saying that the salvation that comes from Christ, the forgiveness of sins, that the repentance that I am proclaiming to you this day is not through the sacrifices, it's not through the religious cultists that is in Jerusalem, it's not through the feasts, it's not through religion, but it is through faith in the One who is coming. It's through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So these people went out in droves to be baptized by John in the wilderness. The people of Judea and the people of Jerusalem, and John did have a very significant following. We need to understand this!

Josephus said that John had such a following that Herod feared John. Herod thought that John would lead an insurrection. So many people had gone out to John's baptism that Herod feared that John would lead them in rebellion and that that there would be an insurrection. Josephus thought that this was the reason Herod had him imprisoned, and ultimately, we know that Herod had him put to death because of Herodias, his brother's wife.

So John did have a very significant following. And there's a reason for that. In Mark 1:6, John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and his diet was locusts and wild honey. At first, this might seem like a very strange verse to put into the Bible. Out of all the things God could have given us He starts to describe the way that John the Baptist was dressed. To tell us that John wore camel's hair and a leather belt.

But there's a significance to this too. There's a reason why Mark and Matthew and the other Gospel writers tell us how John was dressed. And the reason is this was to associate him with the prophet Elijah.

In 2nd Kings chapter one, Elijah the Tishbite was described as a hairy man who had a leather belt around his waist. And the reason why that is significant because in the book of Malachi it said before the coming of the Lord, before the coming of that great and terrible day, that Elijah the Prophet would first come.

So all the Jews of 1st century Israel were waiting for Elijah the Prophet. And you see this as you read the Gospels. They said to John are you Elijah the prophet. Everybody was waiting in anticipation for Elijah the prophet.

As you read the gospels, you will see that the Lord Jesus and the other writers say that John was the fulfillment of that prophecy that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah. John came dressed in the dress of Elijah, but not only that he came dressed in the typical garb of a prophet.

In the book of Zechariah, it speaks of the dress of a prophet and that they wore a hairy robe. So it is of significance that John was a bonafide true prophet of God. Zechariah prophesied at John's birth that John would be called the prophet of the Most High. Jesus said what did you go out into wilderness to see John the prophet, yes and I tell you more than a prophet, John the Baptist was a true prophet of God.

And it's it's no wonder why people went out to him in droves because there had not been a prophet in Israel and some 450 years. 450 years that is a long time.

Just think of the history of our own nation has not even been 450 years. That Israel had gone 450 years from the close of the Old Testament Canon with Malachi, the final prophet of the Old Testament, or if you want to be technical John the Baptist was the final prophet of the Old Testament, as Jesus said, but they had gone 450 years without a prophet. And now John the Baptist comes on the scene as the voice of one crying in the wilderness and his message was clear repent, repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand make way, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.

It behooves us this day to give heed to the words of John. We should give heed to the words of all the prophets because a prophet is a Messenger of God.

So, I'll ask you, have given heed to his message this day? Have you repented of your sins is there some darling loss that you are holding on to?

When I speak of repentance is there something that comes to your mind? Is there one sin that you think of that you that you hold on to, that you cling to? Is there something that you're convicted of when I use the word repentance? What comes to your mind? What is the thing in your life that God is calling you to turn from this day?

Turn from it. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus that "whoever seeks to save his life will lose it but whoever loses his life for His sake and for the gospel sake will keep it. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul."

Do not cling to your sin> Turn from it and turn to God.

In spite of all John's success, in spite of the massive response to his ministry we noticed that John remained humble and he always pointed to One who is coming after him. John always pointed to his Master as we see in Mark 1:7-8.

The Herald's Master. "And he was preaching and saying after me one is coming who is mightier than I and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals>"

In ancient Israel there were laws concerning slaves. If you read the Old Testament there were specific laws for Hebrew slaves and there were specific laws for Gentile slaves. If you were a Hebrew master there were certain things that you could not do to your Hebrew slave because he was your brother.

And in the time of John the Baptist, there was a tradition, a law that a Hebrew master could not ask a Hebrew slave to loose the strap of his sandal. He could not ask a Hebrew slave to take the shoe off his foot. Likewise a rabbi would not ask his disciple to do this task because it was considered so low, so menial that it was reserved for a Gentile.

It was reserved for the Gentiles. And here John the Baptist says that there was one coming after me who is mightier than I and I am not fit to loose the sandal off his foot. That my position is so low that I am not worthy to do the thing that is reserved for a Gentile slave do.

Here you see his humility. Do you see his position? He is constantly pointing to the Messiah. He is constantly pointing to the One who had come after him.

He also shows the character of his master in verse eight. "I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." This is significant.

We have already seen in verse one that Jesus is the Son of God. We have already seen in verse three that John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way for Yahweh, to prepare the way for God. That Jesus Christ is God in the flesh and now here John says, "I come to baptize with water but the one who is coming after me, the one who is mightier than I, will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In the books of Ezekiel, Isaiah and Joel, we read that the one who is to pour out the spirit ,the one who is to baptize in the spirit in the end days it was none other than God Himself. This passage is once again pointing us to the fact that the one who is coming the Lord Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh that He is mighty, that He is able to baptize in the Holy Spirit.

All John could do was baptize with water. This was an external sign, it was an external rite of an inward reality. The same is true for all ministers of God today. All they can do is baptize with water. They have no power to baptize you with the Holy Spirit. This is something that no man can do except the God man, the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one who can give you new life. He is the one who can regenerate you when you are dead in your trespasses and sins. He is the one who can make you a new creation as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ.

We see this fulfilled in regeneration as it speaks of in Titus chapter 3 the washing of the love of the Holy Spirit and of regeneration. It's also spoken of in Acts, where the Spirit being poured out upon the Apostles. That the Spirit came down upon the Apostles with mighty power the baptism of the Holy Spirit. This is the one who was to come. This mighty one, the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God.

So what is the message of John the Baptist? The message is to repent, to be ready, to make a way for the Lord, to prepare yourself for the Lord by repenting of your sins!!

But the message is also that there is the forgiveness of sins. We should not overlook that if are you burdened with sin, are convicted of sin, do you see yourself as one who has transgressed the law of God? Do you see yourself as one who has left the Lord who has departed from the way? Where are you this day in your walk? Have you left the love of your youth?

Return to the Lord. Return to the wilderness.

When God called the people to the wilderness it's as if he called them back to the place of their honeymoon. If you're married this would be like you and your spouse, return to the place where you went on your honeymoon and remember the devotion of your early love.

Remember the devotion of those early days when the fire was still hot, when you when you still cared for one another deeply and everything was rosy and beautiful.

That is the call to return to the Lord. Devote yourself to him. Turn from your sins and receive forgiveness of your sins, the forgiveness that comes from the Lord Jesus Christ.

John did preach the Lord Jesus Christ he said, “behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world>” John pointed us to the one who would take away the sin of the world.

I do the same this morning. If you are burdened by sin, if you struggle with your sin, stop looking to yourself, look to the one who came, to the one mightier than you, to the one who bore your sin on the cross and turn from your sins and embrace Christ and believe in Him. Trust Him for your eternal life. That's the message.

There is a danger though in reading this passage, and as I close I want to I want us to look at that danger together. I've already obviously hinted upon it, and the danger is this: looking at this passage as merely a historical event that has nothing to do with you and to think of this as merely something for the Jews of the first century. Yes, John came and yes, he prepared the way for Jesus. But Jesus has come and gone. He came in His first Advent. He has risen again from the dead. He ascended into heaven so that this call is no longer for you and I, that this was a call only for the Jews of the first century. They were the ones who were to prepare the way, they were the ones who were to repent of their sins, and it has no application for me today.

But I remind you that Jesus Christ is coming again. He will come again and so the call is for you today! Make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Jesus Christ spoke many parables in His earthly ministry and He spoke many parables about His Second Coming. If you read the parables about the Second Coming there is a common theme through most of them, be ready, be ready! Do not let Him come as a thief in the night and catch you unaware. Be as the servant who opens the door for his master when he comes. Do not let him find you as a servant who says my master delays his coming and you begin to eat and to drink with the drunkards and beat your fellow slaves, (Matthew 24).

Brothers and sisters, the call today is to be ready for Christ by repenting of your sins!