



Speaker:
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The Herald of the King

The Gospel of Mark

4/29/2020 (WED) | Bible: **Mark 1:1-8**

Today, we begin our examination of The Gospel According to Mark, and we'll focus on the first eight verses. These are of course about John, known as "John the Baptist", he who was the herald of the Lamb of God.

I'll say a few words about the book itself first.

It is of course the shortest of all the gospel accounts. And this may be why we see this book being preached on less than the others. But there is definitely an advantage in this book. This book has its own benefits just like the other gospel accounts. It's been spoken of a lot that Peter's recollection of the life of Jesus was one of the influences on this gospel account. If you want an example of evidence of this influence, we could perhaps mention that those details that refer to Peter's successes are minimized, whereas his failures are emphasized. This is why Bible scholars down the centuries have concluded that Mark drew on Peter's recollections of the life of Jesus when he compiled his gospel account. He may have also consulted the reports of Matthew as well. And we should always remember that between any external sources that were used and his own God-given style, there was the overarching influence of the Holy Spirit guiding him in all that he wrote.

The book is unusual in that it is very precise in terms of records of times and places and other such details. There's also an emphasis in the book on Jesus' last days. Roughly speaking, the final third of the book covers just that period from Christ's entry into Jerusalem, through his arrest, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension.

What should we say about Mark himself?

Well, I've said before that if you see a name appearing in the scriptures several times, you cannot without evidence assume that the same person is being referred to. We have in the New Testament mention of "Mark", "John Mark" and "Marcus", which is a Latin version of Mark. So we have the gospel writer, we have Barnabas's nephew Marcus, and we also have John Mark, who was the son of a woman called Mary. Was it the same person or not?

Well if Mark was John Mark and Mark was Marcus as well, then we can say that Mark was Jewish. We can say that he was a helper to Paul and Barnabas on Paul's first missionary journey. Sadly, when the team arrived at Pergo, Mark went home and left them.

Now before we assume that he was wrong in doing so, we should remember we don't know the circumstances. Strictly speaking, it's not enough to say that because Paul blamed him for what he did, Mark was wrong. But perhaps Barnabas was right. Paul was still a sinful creature, you know? In

any case, there was a reconciliation between Paul and Mark, and Paul was to later count Mark as a valuable member of the mission team.

This Mark then would also be the one that Peter in one of his letters calls “my son”—that is, his *spiritual* son, his son through the faith. But it's not important. It's not important, really, to determine if these Marks were the same person or not. We can say that the writer of this gospel was not one of the Twelve and it's not likely he ever met Jesus.

Let's speak about John for a bit.

John was prophesied about hundreds of years before. *Hundreds* of years before. It says in Malachi chapter 3 and verse 1, “Behold, I will send my messenger and he shall prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek shall suddenly come to his Temple, even the messenger of the covenant whom you delight in. Behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.” Did you get that? The LORD was coming. Also in our passage, in the third verse of Mark's first chapter, it paraphrases Isaiah Chapter 40 verse 3 which says, “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’”

Prepare ye the way of who? It says “Prepare ye the way of **Jehovah**”. Jehovah was coming!

John was a mighty messenger. But he was there to herald the Messenger OF Messengers, Jesus Christ.

The job of the King's representatives in former times would be to go ahead and make sure everything was planned down to perfection. These representatives of the king would ensure that the route the king would take would be an easy one. They would be known to cut trees down and level the ground off to make the path comfortable, and fit for a monarch. It was also the job of these representatives to *announce* that the king was coming. And in a different way John was to be the one who would prepare for the coming royal visit.

He himself acknowledges that he is the one prophesied about. It says in John's gospel in the first chapter and verse 23, the Baptist said “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’ as said the prophet Isaiah.”

And not only that: Jesus acknowledged who John was. In Matthew 11 and verse 10, Jesus is speaking of John and says, “For this is he of whom it is written ‘Behold. I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.’”

So this is who was prophesied about. He would inhabit the wilderness, and it says in verse 4 of Mark 1, “John did baptize in the wilderness”. We know where he was.

I wonder how people picture the wilderness. Well apart from those major conurbations of Jerusalem, for example, and the smaller town of Bethlehem and a couple of others, most of Judaea was wilderness. It was describing a place that was very sparsely populated and a place that was uncultivated. So you can imagine stony, rocky fields and hills, with maybe grasses and bushes here and there. It was however a great place to take flocks of sheep and goats and so on, because you could take them up the hills and just let them go, and they would just munch away on the vegetation.

It describes in our account John's clothing and his food. It wants us to think about the simplicity of the man. You might remember in Hebrews it talks about those believers who resorted to having to wander in the wilderness wearing nothing but goatskins. These were animal skins, and they'd have to be prepared and once ready they could be wrapped around the body and tied with some sort of belt.

The food was locusts and wild honey. Locusts and wild honey as it mentions in verse 6 was more representative of the type of diet rather than describing his entire diet. I mean, under normal circumstances, if you ate only locusts and honey for your whole life you would be nutritionally deficient. Nevertheless, it sketches for us a John that was living a life of simplicity. Eating locusts don't sound very attractive to us! I won't be surprised if you find the thought loathsome. But for many they were a delicacy. And surely I won't need to persuade you that honey is not something that is a hardship to eat. But like I say the sketch given to us is about simplicity. John was wearing very simple, practical clothing and he was living off the land. It was meant if you like to show an extreme, in comparison to say a prince in the courts of a castle and having all fine clothing and all the best food brought in from around the world. Simplicity then in John's lifestyle, John's clothing and John's diet.

This is far removed from the experience of people in our society. There is no one who has to live like that today. However, I would encourage you to think about the basics in life. It says here in 1st Timothy Chapter 6 and verse 8 that Paul says to Timothy, "Having food and raiment, let us be therewith content." Let us be *content*. Paul's saying if we have a set of clothes on our back, and we have some food for the day or for the next couple of days, let's be content with that. Anything else is a bonus.

Friends, I would encourage you in your prayers to thank God for basic things. The basic things. The things that are very easy to be taken for granted. So I would say in your prayers, say to God, *I thank you that I don't just own one set of clothes—I have wardrobes and draws stuffed with clothes. I have an abundance! I thank you Lord that I don't just have some simple foodstuffs to get me through the next 48 hours, but my kitchen is full of hundreds of different foodstuffs. I have a super abundance of these things!* And you can go on. *Lord, I have in my house clean, running water. I have sanitation. I have the Health Service. I have security through the police.* And you go on and on. And I'm simply making the point that we should not forget despite our circumstances that we should be glad just to have clothes on our back and food in our mouths. Anything more than that is a luxury and we should try to remember that.

The clothes John wore were reminiscent of Elijah's. It says in second Kings chapter 1 and verse 8, "They answered him. 'He was a hairy man and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins'. And then he said 'It is Elijah the Tishbite'" Elijah. The comparison was, I think, intentional.

I came across something interesting in Zechariah whereby false prophets would deliberately clothe themselves in rough clothing to try to make out to the people that they were "proper" prophets! It reminds me of individuals in our day who wear the most impressive religious garb yet have no clue about the gospel of God's free grace. It's all external.

But were we really meant to think about Elijah? After all, he wasn't a clone of Elijah in terms of his clothing or his diet. Well, Jesus tells us. He said to the people *If you can get your heads around*

it...this is Elijah come back! The people were not meant to think this was some kind of Christian version of a reincarnation. No, John was a **spiritual successor** of the ancient prophet.

You know, I've read this first chapter of Mark's gospel many times—as you likely have as well. And our Bible reading means that we read maybe a chapter or several chapters in one sitting. And we read it like a book. We spend just a second or two on each sentence or, as here, each verse. We need to do that as part of our absorption of what's in the scriptures. We need an overview of the story, of the account, of the teaching. We need that context.

But we should never neglect zooming in on individual verses. Because I suspect that there's an incredible amount of blessed information contained in the scriptures that we might never during our entire Christian lives see. I've said this before, but I would encourage you to try this out see if what I'm claiming makes sense. Try it out. Pick a passage and pause on it. Spend a few minutes to get the full magnitude of what is happening. As you spend time on a verse, a clearer and clearer picture will emerge in your mind.

The verse in our passage today that moved me to mention that to you about meditating on verses has to do with verse five. It's very easy to skim past verse 5 which says, “And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.” So we skim past that in our reading and we get the impression that John was out there, and some people turned up and got baptized. Folks it says **all** the land. All the land. Now we're not going to take the Arminian argument that “all” means literally every single one. That's just childish. “All” in the Bible can mean many, most, or every individual. In our account here, it seems pretty clear that saying all the land and all Jerusalem went out to him means a *great many* did.

If there was some outrageous event in our own city, we might say “The whole of Liverpool was in uproar!” Now it wouldn't be *strictly* true. We could find an individual at home who didn't care about the event. Does that make it untrue? Does that make it a lie? No. It's acceptable that if we mean a great many or even most of the people we can describe that as “all the people”.

And so here we can say with confidence that there were thousands of people. We don't know the population of Judea or Jerusalem for certain at this time. The estimates vary quite wildly. But taking all things into consideration, I have to conclude that they numbered thousands. And we don't know the rate of this visiting John. We don't know whether it was one a day or hundreds a day. We don't know how long John was in the ministry for.

But still, I would say this to you. During his ministry, for thousands of people to leave their homes and go to hear the preaching of John, and to come with repentance towards God, and to desire to be baptized by John for the remission of sins counts as nothing less than a **major spiritual revival**. It was most certainly a revival. All this a prelude to the coming royal visit of the King—that is, the King OF Kings.

Of course, it was a different type of preparation than the one I mentioned before. As a representative of the King of Kings, it was not Elijah's job to cut trees down and to level a route. IT WAS TO DECLARE REMISSION OF SINS. John's job was to prepare not the places but the *hearts*. God used John as a mouthpiece. GOD USED HIM TO INITIATE A GREAT AWAKENING, ONE OF THE GREATEST SPIRITUAL AWAKENINGS THE WORLD HAS SEEN. Thousands coming in repentance. Thousands!

How humbling and exciting it is that God can use normal people. Okay, John was hardly normal like us in many ways, but he was still a sinful creature like us. God does use people like us to accomplish his purposes. And I would go further and say that God brought **you** into this world to accomplish certain things. So what better way to conduct your Christian life than to search out what God would have you do.

All this...all this preparation, for the one that Mark introduces in the very first verse: JESUS CHRIST, THE SON OF GOD—that is, THE ANOINTED SAVIOR, GOD THE SON, THE KING, ETERNAL, IMMORTAL, INVISIBLE, WAS COMING TO EARTH.

John was baptizing people. The Jews were familiar with baptism, that is washings, to symbolize spiritual cleansing. We can see the variety of ways the Holy Spirit works. For these people:

- We have the Holy Spirit animating them their whole lives—keeping them alive in other words.
- They experienced another work of the spirit whereby he caused them to be repentant about their sin.
- And for many of these people, they were also the objects of another work of the spirit, whereby he gave them miraculous gifts.

But it's different for us. Throughout the whole of church history, the norm has been different than that. Slightly different.

- We too have the Holy Spirit from birth giving us life. Every breath we take. Every time our heart beats. All from God. Second-by-second, he sustains us.
- During the course of our lives, there is a special Holy Spirit influence, over hours or over decades. And as this increases, an awareness grows. And that builds and builds until the appointed day of conversion comes, when the sinful man or woman fully realizes that they are sinners. They understand the consequences of sin, both in general and in particular to their case—the *terrifying consequences* of sinfulness. And they come to see that there is a way out in Jesus Christ, and he is presented to them as the only one who can save. So it is that they come to him and they receive forgiveness of sins and a confidence that eternal life is theirs.
- And following on from that, the Holy Spirit continues to work in us. Growing us in grace and knowledge of Jesus and his work. Subduing that childish spirit of judgmentalism that Christians often have after conversion, and replacing it gradually with a spirit of humility and grace and a deeper knowledge of Jesus.

It's this Jesus that was spoken about by John.

It tells us this in Acts chapter 19 and verse 4. Paul said, “John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Jesus Christ.”

John was a slightly older relative of Jesus. He entered the ministry before Jesus. Yet he insisted that JESUS CHRIST WAS SUPERIOR TO HIM IN CHARACTER AND ACTIVITY. Superior to John the Baptist himself! Elijah, MKII! This is the John:

- Whose coming was prophesied centuries before

- Whose birth was foretold by an angel
- Whose purpose was to be A VOICE for God
- Whose ministry was so powerful, he was counted as a prophet
- Whose entrance onto the stage of God's purposes was described as a return of Elijah himself
- Whose preaching was used by God to bring about one of the biggest revivals of repentance towards God the world has ever seen
- And whose life was to end as a martyr of God.

He says, *The one who is coming after me is mightier than me.* Mightier than John.

He doesn't just exalt Jesus character. He says his work is superior. Jesus would baptize with, or into, the Holy Spirit. Water was used, the application of water symbolizing the contact between a heavenly salvation and corrupt mankind.

What a way to describe the difference between him and Jesus in verse 7. What does he say? It talks about a "latchet", which makes a great deal of sense to Oliver Cromwell, but not so much to us! I'll paraphrase: "There's one coming, one mightier than me, and I'm not even worthy to untie his shoes."

It used to be said that disciples of a great teacher would do anything for him. But there are things they wouldn't. That is, the most menial things. And the most menial thing perhaps was when the master came into a town and into someone's home. He would normally want to have his sandals taken off and his feet bathed. That job was left for the servants. The unpleasant job was left for the lowest in society. And then John says, *I'm not even that good.* I'm not even worthy to do the most menial thing for Jesus Christ.

Such was his humility. Such was his awareness of who Jesus Christ was: **God himself.**

May John's humility regarding Jesus Christ be ours too.

Amen.