

John Prepares the Way of the Lord: Mark 1:1-8
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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I'm very excited to begin this morning a sermon series through the Gospel of Mark. We are beginning a new year, and we will begin this new study. And what we'll consider this morning are the first 8 verses of Mark, which tell us about John the Baptist as he prepares the way of the Lord.

Who was Mark?

By way of introduction, let me briefly mention a few things about this man, Mark, the human author of this Gospel. He is John Mark who is mentioned several times in Acts as one who accompanied Paul and Barnabas on missionary journeys. Mark's mother, Mary, hosted the Jerusalem church in her home. In Acts 12 where Peter is miraculously rescued from prison by an angel of the Lord, it says that he then "went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying" (Acts 12:12). Then in verse 25 of that chapter it says that "Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark."

In Acts 13:13 we find the infamous event concerning Mark, when he deserted Paul and returned to Jerusalem. And then in Acts 15:36-41 we read of the sharp disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over the question of whether they should take John Mark with them on this second missionary journey. Paul didn't want to because Mark had deserted them on the previous journey. So there was a division. Barnabas took Mark, and Paul took Silas. And they parted ways. But there must have been reconciliation at some point, because Mark was with Paul as he mentions him in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24. And in 2 Timothy 4:11 Paul writes, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry."

Mark also had a close connection with Peter that apparently began very early on when the Jerusalem church was meeting in Mark's mother's house. In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter refers to Mark affectionately as "my son." Mark was with Peter, mentored by Peter, serving in ministry with Peter. And the understanding has been that Peter is the human source for Mark's writing. Papias, who was a church leader in the late first-century and early second-century, said that Mark wrote according to Peter's eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life. So what we have in the Gospel of Mark is a faithful record of Peter's knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ. And, of course, it is all inspired by the Holy Spirit so that

the historical accounts given by Peter, written by Mark, are also the very words of God, inerrant, infallible, and authoritative.

The Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (verse 1)

Let's begin, then, by looking at these first 8 verses of Mark. We'll look at the brief introduction in verse 1, and then we'll focus on four things we learn about John the Baptist in verses 2-8.

Mark is the shortest of all the Gospels, and we are struck with this fact at the very outset because there is nothing about the birth of Jesus, as we find in Matthew and Luke. There are no genealogies. And there isn't even a theological prologue like we find in the beginning of John's Gospel. The Gospel of Mark starts off immediately, and briefly, with the ministry of John the Baptist.

Verse 1 says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The word "gospel," in the Greek *euangelion*, was not a new word for Mark or for those who would have read or listened to this. It is joyful tidings. It is good news. It implies radical changes for the world. And as Mark expresses this it is also the good news that prophecies made long ago are now going to be fulfilled.

It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is, Jesus the Christ. Christ is not His last name. Christ is the title, Messiah. Christos is simply the Greek form of the Hebrew word Messiah. He is Jesus, the Anointed One. He is the promised deliverer. And He is the Son of God, which is to emphasize further that Jesus is the promised One sent from God the Father. In the middle of Mark's Gospel, in Mark 8:29, Peter confesses, "You are the Christ." And at the end of the Gospel, in Mark 15:39, the centurion, as he watched Jesus die on the cross, said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"

This book was written to proclaim the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the fulfillment of all the promises, the deliverer, the Anointed One, the Son of God. It is the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, and Mark begins by telling us about John the Baptist who prepared the way of the Lord. Before he even mentions John's name he cites the prophetic words from the Old Testament that foretold the coming of this person.

John Is the Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies (vv. 2-3)

I want us to notice four things that Mark shows us about John the Baptist. The first is that John fulfilled Old Testament Prophecies. Let's look at this in Mark's Old Testament quotations in verses 2-3. Mark here actually combines quotations from Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3. But since the Isaiah quotation is the dominant one, and the other two are introductory, he cites Isaiah the prophet. He says, "As it is written in Isaiah the

prophet.” The first part of the quotation—“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way”—is from Exodus 23:20 and quoted again at the end of the Old Testament in Malachi 3:1. In both places, the angel or messenger is preparing the way for Yahweh, God Himself. And in the application of this to John and Jesus, we see the significance of what Mark is saying about them. John is the appointed herald and forerunner of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, who is Himself God.

This becomes even clearer in verse 3, in the quotation from Isaiah 40:3, “the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of *the Lord*, make his paths straight.” Mark is communicating very clearly that John the Baptist is preparing the way of the Messiah, who is God. This is one of the awesome things about the Bible, that the Old Testament points to and promises the coming of the Messiah, and the New Testament shows how those promises are fulfilled in the Person and work of Jesus Christ. And Mark here is showing us this continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In Exodus and Malachi and Isaiah, there is a foreshadowing of this person who would prepare the way of the Lord. We find out in the New Testament that John the Baptist is this messenger, and Jesus is the Lord.

As we begin a new year and begin a new study through the Gospel of Mark, this should give us great confidence in the Word of God. Over thousands of years God has made Himself known in mighty deeds and in mighty words. And in mighty words He has foretold mighty deeds to come. In the Old Testament verses cited here by Mark, there were pointers to the great things that would happen as the promised Messiah came onto the scene of history. There would be a messenger coming before Him, preparing the way for Him, humbly pointing to Him. This messenger is John the Baptist, and he is the fulfillment of these Old Testament prophecies.

John Was Baptizing in the Wilderness (verses 4-5)

A second thing we see about John is that he was baptizing in the wilderness. Verses 2-3 show us that the Old Testament pointed to the coming of this individual. Then verses 4-5 begin to tell us about who this individual was and what he was doing. The beginning of verse 4 tells us his name: John. It says, “John appeared.” This is fulfillment language. There was the quotation from the Old Testament, and now verse 4 tells us that John was the fulfillment of those prophecies. John appeared on the scene. And what was he doing? He was baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Notice the emphasis on the wilderness. It showed up in the Isaiah quote: “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” Then in

verse 4 Mark connects that with John, that he was baptizing “in the wilderness.” This is significant because Mark wants us to see that John the Baptist is coming as a figure like Elijah. Elijah was a man of the wilderness, a prophet, calling people to repentance and preparing the way of the Lord. John comes in the same way: a man of the wilderness, a prophet, calling people to repentance and preparing the way of the Lord. Later in Mark, in 9:13, John the Baptist is explicitly connected with Elijah. Jesus says, “But I tell you that Elijah has come, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.” John comes as a prophet in the likeness of Elijah.

The significance of the wilderness goes all the way back to the Exodus, when God led the Hebrews out of Egypt into the wilderness, and revealed Himself to them there, and established a covenant with them there. What’s happening in the ministry of John the Baptist is a kind of second exodus. They are being called out into the wilderness to repent and turn to God and experience a new work of God in their midst.

The other aspect of what John was doing was, of course, baptism. His location was significant in that he was in the wilderness. And what he was doing was massively important because it was so unique and so tied to what his ministry was all about. John’s role, as we saw in the Old Testament quotation, was to prepare the way of the Lord. And the way he was doing this was, as verse 4 says, by “baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”

There were various Jewish washings and proselyte baptism that were known at that time, but John’s baptism was something very unique. It was not a repeated ritual washing, and it was not something intended for Gentiles who wanted to become a proselyte of Judaism. There was something about John’s ministry that was unparalleled in the other religious practices of his day. What he was doing was so unique that he became known as the Baptist, or the Baptizer. John was calling people to come out into the wilderness for him to baptize them in the Jordan River. And they were to do this as an evidence of their repentant hearts.

John was “*proclaiming* a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” He was preaching repentance. He was a hellfire and brimstone kind of preacher. He was not afraid to confront sin. He was not afraid to step on people’s toes. He spoke very bluntly and boldly to those who came to hear him. Both Matthew 3 and Luke 3 record him saying, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is

laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” John was confronting the sin of the people and calling them to radical repentance. This was his role in preparing the way of the Lord.

Baptism in water was not the means of being forgiven, as it may seem from the phrase, “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” The point is that John was preaching repentance and then baptizing people as an outward sign of their repentance.

The Greek word for repentance, *metanoia*, means a change of mind that results in a change of life. It means turning away from sin and turning to a new way of life that is oriented toward Christ. John was so adamant about this message and so urgent in his proclamation because the Messiah was about to appear. Repent, people, the new King is coming! Turn away from your sinful lives and look to our great Messiah who will fulfill all of God’s promises. Don’t rebel against Him, which will result in being condemned and punished by Him, but instead submit to Him and follow Him. This is how John prepared the way, and it’s the same message that Jesus Himself then preached. Down just a few verses in Mark 1:15 Jesus proclaims, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

Brothers and sisters, this is a message we need to hear. This is a message that I need to hear, and it’s a message that every one of us here needs to take to heart this morning. What a great message this is for us at the very start of a new year! I don’t know where you’re at here at the beginning of a new year. Maybe you are sad and depressed following the excitement of Christmas. Maybe you’re feeling relieved that the busyness of the holidays is over. Maybe you’re exhausted. You may be looking into this new year with high hopes and exciting possibilities. Or maybe you’re looking into the coming months and things look pretty bleak and discouraging. Maybe right now you’re feeling generally apathetic about your life and especially about your spiritual life. Maybe you’ve been so wrapped up with gifts and parties and family gatherings that your time of personal prayer and Bible study has been squeezed out of the schedule.

The bold proclamation of John the Baptist is just what we need to hear, no matter where you’re at right now in your spiritual walk. If you’re an unbeliever, a young believer, a struggling believer . . . Whoever you are, whatever is going on in your heart at this point in your life, this is a message that we need to hear now, and a message we need to hear again and again. Repent! Turn away from sin. Passionately pursue a life of godliness and holiness.

Friends, may this be a year of tremendous spiritual growth among us. I yearn for that in my own life, and I yearn for it in the lives of all of you who are here, and for many others throughout this city. I pray that we will be encouraged and convicted by this message so that we put away the things in our lives that are dishonoring to God: gossip, anger, bitterness, gluttony, sexual immorality, pornography, spiritual apathy, prayerlessness, crude joking, immodesty, jealousy, covetousness, greed, selfishness, sloth, idolatry, drunkenness. Let us not justify these behaviors in our lives, these attitudes in our hearts. Instead, may we be grieved by our sin and repent of it and fight against it as though heaven and hell are in the balance, because they are. The King is coming. In our case, we are looking to the imminent appearing of the Messiah, not in His first coming, but His second coming. And we must be called to repent and prepare for His coming, because, as I just read from Matthew 3, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Heaven and hell are at stake. The Messiah will soon return. And to be ready for Him, we must be a people of repentance. Continual repentance. Radical repentance. Humble, heartfelt repentance. We must be confessing our sin and turning away from our sin and bearing the fruit of repentance. I challenge you, brothers and sisters, to look seriously and honestly into your own heart, and encourage the input of wise friends around you, so that you can see more clearly the sin in your life and repent of it. Don't justify sin or minimize it or pretend that it's not there. Repent.

And for those of you who are not believers—repent. Stop living under the delusion that you can continue through life rebelling against God, ignoring God, and not have any consequences. There will be consequences. There is hell to pay for a life of prideful rebellion against God. The wonderful news of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ took that punishment upon Himself in order to set free those who repent of sin and trust in Him. I pray this morning that if you are here and are not a repentant Christ-follower, that you will bow the knee and acknowledge your sin and joyfully submit to Jesus Christ and receive the forgiveness that He purchased on the cross for us. This is a call to repentance for all.

Verse 5 describes the widespread response to John's preaching. "And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." This would have been an awesome scene to behold. It was national revival. People were streaming out to the wilderness, to hear a hellfire and brimstone preacher, and to be convicted of sin and confess their sins and repent and be baptized. God was working mightily through the ministry of John to prepare the way for the Lord Jesus.

John Wore the Uniform of a Prophet (verse 6)

We've seen that John is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and that John was baptizing in the wilderness. The third thing to notice about John is that he wore the uniform of a prophet. I'll just comment on this briefly from verse 6. Mark describes John the Baptist in verse 6, telling us what he wore and what he ate, and in this way he is identifying him as a prophet. Verse 6 says, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." In 2 Kings 1:8 King Ahaziah was seeking a word from Elijah, and he sent some messengers to find him. And when the messengers returned they reported that they had met a man who sent a message to the king. And the king said, "What kind of man was he who came to meet you and told you these things?" And they answered, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." And he said, "It is Elijah the Tishbite." The king knew Elijah by his distinct garb. Not everyone was walking around in a hairy garment and a leather belt. But Elijah was. And what John the Baptist was doing was identifying himself with the prophet. He was identifying himself with Elijah. John the Baptist was the promised Elijah who was to come as the forerunner of the Messiah. At the end of Malachi—and remember that Mark just quoted from Malachi 3:1—the very last words of the Old Testament say this: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction" (Malachi 4:5-6). John the Baptist was this promised one who came in the likeness of Elijah, and even in the way he dressed he identified himself with Elijah.

His diet characterizes a man who was trying to survive in the wilderness. He ate locusts and wild honey. Locusts don't sound very good to us, but apparently they are nutritious and are still eaten by groups who live in areas where there are lots of them. It also happens to be the case that the Mosaic law permits the eating of locusts in Leviticus 11:22. So John ate locusts and wild honey. It was what he had available to him in the wilderness, and it is what he survived on. He was a man of the wilderness, identifying with the prophet Elijah, preaching repentance and preparing the way of the Lord.

John Pointed to Christ (verses 7-8)

Finally, and most importantly, we need to see that John pointed to Christ. Look at verses 7-8. "And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized

you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John shows here in a profound way his humble role in the drama of redemption. He played such a significant role, and yet it was a humble role. As he states in John 3:30, “He must increase, I must decrease.” This was the joyful and humble place of John the Baptist. The task of untying sandals was not even required of Hebrew slaves. Gentile slaves had to do that job. John speaks of this One who will come after him as One who is so much greater than him that he is not even worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. He was saying that, compared to Christ, he was lower than the lowliest slave. Jesus is that much greater than him.

John was a man of immense influence. The crowds were flocking to him day after day. And yet he was a man who understood his task. It was not about him. It was all about Christ. John’s preaching was not for John’s glory. It was not to draw attention to himself, but rather to point people to Christ.

I think there’s quite a lesson here for us in thinking about the humble role that is assigned to each one of us. Christ must increase, we must decrease. Christ is so much greater than us that we are not even worthy to serve Him in the lowliest of ways. And yet we have the joyful privilege of pointing people to Him. It’s not about us. It’s about Christ. The preaching and teaching and ministries of this church are not about us. It must all be done in the humble attempt to exalt Christ. Our work, our relationships, our families, our possessions, must unto Christ’s glory. Not self-centered, but Christ-centered. Let’s seek to be like John in this way, humbly and boldly pointing away from ourselves to the Person of Jesus Christ.

In verse 8 John then shows us the difference between the baptism of repentance that he was calling for, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit that was soon to come. “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” John was only preparing the way. His baptism was a baptism of repentance. But Jesus Christ was about to come and would eventually baptize the early church in the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In Acts 1:5 Jesus says, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

Another place in Acts where we see the difference between John’s baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit is in Acts 19 where Paul was in Ephesus and found some disciples who did not yet know about the Holy Spirit. Paul said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of

repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.” (Acts 19:2-5) John, in everything that he did, was preparing the way of the Lord. What John is saying in the statement, “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” is this: He’s saying, All I can do is put you in the water as an outward demonstration of your repentance, but the Messiah will be able to save you. All I can do is this outward symbol. He can change your heart. He can regenerate you by the Holy Spirit. Thus John the Baptist, both in his preaching and his baptism paved the way for Jesus’ preaching and baptism. He was humbly pointing to Jesus.

And this is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the way that Mark begins this account of Jesus’ life and ministry. It is the ministry of John the Baptist that prepares the way. John is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. John was baptizing in the wilderness. John wore the uniform of a prophet. And John pointed to Christ.