

Mark 1 - The Beginning of the End

So what is this passage talking about and why does it matter? Mark is talking about an exodus. Where God's people move out of exile, and into the Promised Land. Just as Israel went into the land and conquered, so Mark is saying that Christ brought the people out of exile into the Promised Land. But because Jesus is LORD, no force, not the wilderness or Satan will be able to overcome Him. This story is our story as well, for without Christ we will be left in the wilderness. In Christ however, we can enter the land and receive all of the benefits of the kingdom.

The idea of promise is important to the passage, so can you remember a time that you were promised something that you really desired? One example that sticks out is an engagement. There is a promise (usually accompanied by a ring), that the two parties involved will enter into marriage and love one another. It may seem obvious, but this does not mean the couple is married. There is longing and expectation for the beginning of the marriage to start. When the engagement begins, we can say that is an official starting point of the relationship. The day of the wedding marks the end of the beginning (or the engagement). And the commencement of the wedding ceremony signals that it is the beginning of the end of exile from one another.

In these verses, we read of the end of the beginning, and the beginning of the end. Mark's narrative picks up where the Old Testament prophets left off. Mark tells us that they had prophesied of the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. Of course, the Old Testament prophets were not certain about how these events would unfold and so it is not entirely clear from their

perspective how they would be fulfilled. Mark puts flesh and bones on the shadows of the Old Testament prophecies, however to help us see the true meaning behind the Old Testament message.

In verse one, Mark informs his listeners that everything that proceeds will be explaining how the Gospel of Jesus Christ began.

Verses 2 & 3 explain that the events that unfolded around Christ were also part of the Old Testament promises. While Mark indicates that he is citing from Isaiah, he is in fact citing from Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1 (which is alluding to Exodus 23:20). John the Baptist is the fulfillment of these two Old Testament prophecies. These prophecies that Mark quotes play an important role in how Israel viewed its history **as a** history of exile. A quick overview of them will help us unpack how they impact Mark's belief that the fulfillment has come.

In the Garden, Adam and Eve broke the Law of God by succumbing to the temptations of the serpent to eat of the fruit of the Tree. They were exiled out of the Garden of Eden. In his mercy, God promised Adam that he would provide victory over Satan in Genesis 3:15, "For I will put enmity between your seed and his, he will bruise your heel, but you will crush his head". Israel's history is forever looking to this day when God will bring the kingdom and deal with sin that has come into the world.

One of the first and most important ways that this was manifested was through the Exodus of Israel out of Egypt. God is faithful to his promise to make Abraham's descendants a great people. He calls Moses to lead the

people out of Egypt. Israel was relieved that they were out of Egypt, **until** they got into the wilderness where they faced trials and fell into sin (particularly idolatry). Moses and the first generation brought out of Egypt were not allowed to enter the Promised Land but Moses prepared the way for Joshua. Even under Joshua, however, Israel did not maintain the Promised Land. Because Israel lacked faith in the promises of God, they began to lose portions of the Promised Land. They went back into exile.

Israel was able to grow however under the rule of David, the Anointed one of God. Through David, God promised to send a King that would bring peace to the kingdom. After Israel's monarchy falls into sin, however, it is conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians. The Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah foretell a time when their exile will be ended and they will again live in the land God promised them. The prophecy in Isaiah 40 is uttered when Israel is in captivity. There is a longing for the LORD, YHWH, to fulfill the promises that he made with Israel to end their exile. This is why the first century Jewish reader would have eagerly listened to Mark's narrative. With the fulfillment of Isaiah 40 (and Malachi 3 and Exodus 20), Mark is proclaiming that the exile is coming to an end! God is coming to save his people from exile!

And this is why the coming of John the Baptist is important. He is preparing the peoples hearts to receive the promises that have been waiting for. He calls them to repent from their sin and calls them out to the wilderness to receive baptism.

This account seems familiar, so it may be easy to glance over the interesting detail included in verses 4&5. The coming of the kingdom outside of Jerusalem is fascinating when one thinks of the importance of the temple in worship. This was where God meet the people. But the ministry of John and the commissioning of Jesus take place in the wilderness, and the baptisms take place in the Jordan River. Is this just boring historical and geographical information?

No. In fact, when properly understood, Mark's language of the coming of the kingdom in the wilderness will clarify why Jesus ministry will end the exile.

For the Jews, the worship of God took place in the temple. This would naturally be where spiritual revival and renewal would be expected to take place. According to the popular Jewish perspective, Jerusalem was considered the place in the world to which all nations would one day come. John turns this on its head: far from embarking on triumphal pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the crowds flee to the margins for repentance. (R.T. France 68)

The wilderness on the other hand is dangerous and scary. In Deuteronomy, it is described as a howling wasteland. The wilderness would not be the ideal place for God to begin a revival. But Mark surprises his readers and sets them in the wilderness.

But the theme of the wilderness actually runs throughout the Old Testament. In fact, this idea of the wilderness being a place of renewal is found

throughout the Old Testament. Where does God guide Israel after exiling them from Egypt? And where does he give the Law to Moses? In the wilderness. Jeremiah testifies to the idea of the wilderness being a place of a renewal in Chapter 2 verses 2-3 which says, “I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness...Israel was holy to YHWH.” The wilderness is **not** the Promised Land. But the wilderness was used in the Exodus to reawaken Israel’s heart so that they could journey into the Promised Land.

What does this mean for the message of John the Baptist?

John is paving the way so that the exile can begin. He lays the way for the coming of one who will take the Promised Land. Mark records that John saw himself explicitly as a prophet by recording that John wore clothing becoming of a prophet (as seen in verse 6). His prophetic message was simple. People needed to repent of their sins and be washed in baptism in the wilderness to prepare for the pilgrimage into the land.

But isn’t the idea of baptism odd considering who the Jews are and they promises they were given? Weren’t circumcision and sacrifices at the temple sufficient?

John’s message combats any idea that these things were good enough. Because of the Jews sin, they were no better than the Gentiles! In fact, in the Gospel of Luke records that John preached that the Pharisee’s and religious leaders were a brood of vipers. Even though Israel worshipped in the temple, John’s message indicates that they were actually in exile. That

exile was coming to an end, and God was bringing to an end those things that kept Israel from entering the Promised Land.

Therefore the sin of the Jews would mean that judgment was upon them. This is why John emphasized the importance of repentance and baptism. If the people did not cleanse themselves from their sin, they would come under the judgment of God. John's message marked an important point in redemptive history.

The coming of the kingdom was at hand, and John signaled the beginning. The one coming after him would bring a baptism far more powerful than his baptism.

John even goes so far as to say that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie his successor's sandal! In the Jewish world Hebrew slaves were considered too highly to do such a task. But John indicates that his successor would be that much greater than him.

This is not false humility from John, but a real conviction that the story of God was unfolding in an incredible way. John saw that the promise of God to end Israel's exile was at hand, and that while he would not bring it to an end, his ministry laid the foundation for the coming Messiah.

For the Jewish reader in the first century, they would have assumed that John was a forerunner to the God himself.

Isaiah 40 tells that God is going to redeem the earth and reveal his glory so that all flesh shall see it. This is the action of God himself. In fact, the passage reads, “In the wilderness prepare the way for YHWH, make YHWH’s paths straight”.

Mark is making the argument that Jesus IS YHWH! God has come to be with his people and rescue them from their sin. For no one other than YHWH would be able to do it, Abraham, Moses, and David has all failed. Mark is saying in Isaiah the one who comes is God, and this can be no one other than Christ!

But if Jesus YHWH, and John already acknowledges that his successor’s baptism is superior to his, why does Jesus come all the way from the North in Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan with a baptism of repentance? Did Jesus need to repent of sin?

Because Mark has already established that Jesus is YHWH, it would be impossible for Jesus baptism to be for the remission of his sin. Because Jesus is by his very nature holy, it would be unthinkable to ascribe sin to him. The best way of explaining this though comes from understanding Jesus’ mission and identification as a perfect representative of Israel.

He is coming to redeem Israel and end the exile that had kept them from entering the Land. As such, he came as a representative of Israel to fulfill all righteousness for her. Israel had been baptized in the Red Sea at the Exodus, but in their conquest of the land, they had also been baptized into the Jordan River in Joshua 3.

Mark includes the details of WHERE the baptism takes place because of the importance that it has that the exile is going to be over. Just as Joshua's troops crossed the Jordan to conquer the Promised Land, so Jesus was passing through the Jordan to lead the people of God into the Promised Land. The difference being that Jesus' kingdom will last forever and expand over the face of the whole earth, while Joshua's kingdom fell apart after a generation.

So the reason Jesus receives John's baptism is to be identified with the people of God. Jesus accepts to fulfill righteousness where Israel has fallen short. Jesus' baptism marks him as the Son of God, coming to deliver Israel.

In the baptism, we also see the beauty of the Trinity working at the baptism of Jesus Christ. The Father is watching over his Son, the Son is obediently following the Father, and the Spirit is being poured out in and through Jesus. It is not only the Son involved in bringing God's people out of exile, it is the Father and the Spirit as well!

And we also see continuity between the baptism that we receive and the baptism Jesus received. Through faith in baptism, we have the adoption as Sons to the Father. John's baptism could not communicate this promise, but only looked forward to it. The power of our baptism therefore is that we receive the Holy Spirit because we have been recognized as sons of God.

The Father's words to Christ, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" has enormous ramifications for you and me! Because the Father is

satisfied with the Son, in Jesus, we are acceptable to the Father. We are freed from the power of death and sin, which means that we are free to pursue righteousness.

This idea of Christ's sonship (and its implications for us) is further explained by Mark in verses 12-13.

Mark tells us immediately after his baptism; Jesus is taken into the wilderness. As you may have guessed, this is an allusion to the history of Israel. Israel was in the wilderness for 40. In a similar manner, Jesus was taken into the wilderness for 40 days to fast and pray, and he was met with temptation by Satan. However, Jesus did not fall into sin, but was able to resist Satan and emerge over him victorious. Even in the scary and hostile environment, with beasts of the wilderness surrounding him, Jesus was able to overcome the power of Satan.

The beauty of these verses is that while Mark has above identified Christ as being YHWH, he demonstrates that Christ was truly a man and was tempted like we are. Sometimes people can look at this story and think, "Well, Jesus is God, so he couldn't have sinned." Or, "He did not succumb to temptation, so he doesn't know how intense my struggles and temptations are." The problem with these objections is that they do not comprehend the power of sin.

For example, Lets say you and I were climbing a mountain. Because I get tired I stop ½ way up. You on the other hand, reach the summit. How would you respond if I told you that you did not understand the difficulty of the

mountain because you overcame it? Would you not respond that you were actually the one that experienced how difficult it was to climb the mountain? Sure, I experienced the difficulty for a while, but I gave in. You fought the entire way and overcame it. Who knows the power of that mountain more?

In the same way, in the wilderness, Christ overcame sin, and conquered it. Christ understands and comprehends sin even more than we do! And this is precisely why we place our hope and faith in Him. First, because we cannot even begin the journey up the mountain without him, and second, because if we cling to Him, he is strong enough to take us to the summit.

Christ leads us in battle and overcomes the wilderness, temptation, and all the powers of Satan. You were once captive to sin. But now every part of our being has the power to serve our King! His kingdom has begun, and as we acknowledge Christ as Lord, we reign together with him.

Therefore we have confidence to engage in the battle against sin. When we face temptation and trials we can stand up under them because our King has withstood them

But this raises another question. In faith we possess the land because Christ has entered into it, but by sight we are still in the wilderness, on our way to take hold of the kingdom. So what temptations do you face? Love of Money, sex, or power? Or maybe you have made an idol out of your family, your mother or father, or your children, or brothers and sisters. Or perhaps, like many of the Jews during this time, maybe you have made an idol of religious things. Your service or attendance at the church, your holding an

office in the church, or your theological precision. The remedy to all of these things is in Jesus proclamation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”

There may be certain temptations that seem difficult and impossible to battle. You may feel overcome, alone in the wilderness as it were, fighting a losing battle with your temptations. But the mission of Jesus was not only to lead us into the Promised Land, but to bring life to the wilderness and bring it into submission.

Brothers and sisters, our King has defeated death and sin, and we can now live to serve him. No temptation is too strong in Christ. Therefore, we should be working out our salvation in fear and trembling, knowing that Christ is continuing to claim our hearts and change them from the barren wilderness, into a thriving Garden. Christ has entered into the kingdom, so we can truly say that we are in the kingdom. But we are still journeying into the land and Christ is still in the process of making all things new. Christ will come again to end our pilgrimage, but we know he is there, and we are on our way to him. Therefore we live confidently, striving to make the wilderness transformed by the power of the Gospel.