

The Desert

Prologue Part 3

Mark 1:2-8 9/9/2017

Summary: The prologue is dominated by the desert. In Isaiah, the desert refers to the spiritual desolation that resulted from God’s judgment. The voice calls for a messenger to remove the obstacles preventing God’s restoring return. The messenger will be Elijah, who will prepare people so that when the Lord comes, they won’t be swept away in judgment. John was that Elijah figure. He flattened the mountains by calling people to repentance. The multitudes accepted him as a prophet. The ability to understand and accept is dependent on whether your heart is repentant.

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Mark 1:1 The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way”— 3 “a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ ” 4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: “After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Introduction

The Desert

If Mark were making a movie instead of writing a book, I think I know how it would start. It wouldn’t be like Luke, which opens with the high priest in the glorious and awesome golden interior of the Holy Place in the Temple in the holy city. It wouldn’t be like John, which opens in the mysterious counsel of God before the beginning of time. The opening scene of Mark’s Gospel would start with the camera zoomed in on a scorpion, and then a tumbleweed rolls by as the camera pans out and you see that

you're in the middle of a desolate wilderness. As far as the eye can see, deserted, uninhabited land, no sign of civilization, and no way to get to civilization, and the wind howls through sharp, gaping canyons and steep, barren hills with rock walls – a desolate wasteland. That would be the opening shot because the barren desert is the backdrop of the introductory section of the Gospel of Mark (1:1-13).

I told you that the outline of Mark breaks down roughly into two halves. The first half is in Galilee and the second half focuses on Jerusalem. (When you hear Jerusalem, think Denver, and Galilee is the area north of Fort Collins. So the first half of the book is in Fort Collins, and the second half of the book Jesus starts making his way down toward Denver, and he's crucified in Denver.) That's a rough breakdown of the *body* of the book, but it leaves out the prologue. Jesus doesn't actually go up to Fort Collins area until v.14 of ch.1.

Mark 1:14 After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God.

That's where that main body of the book starts. But the first 13 verses are a prologue. And the prologue takes place out in the Judean desert – northeast of Jerusalem (Hudson or Keensburg out on I-76).

3 “a voice of one calling in the desert 4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert... all the people ... went out to him.

Then Jesus is baptized, and **12 At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, 13 and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals** The desert was a place that was uninhabited because it's hostile to human life. Dangerous wild animals are out there, there's very little food and water, no shelter – desolation.

Why does the story of Jesus begin out there? The answer is in the book of Isaiah, and when I show it to you, you'll see this whole opening chapter explode with meaning and significance. But first, let me clear something up from 2 weeks ago.

Review

I realized last time that I wasn't very clear when I gave you the outline of the book. The first week I told you that Mark presents the gospel in three parts, and I also told you about the three geographical locations – Galilee, then the trip to Jerusalem, then his last week in Jerusalem. I think that might have caused some confusion. Those three geographical references are *not* the three parts of the gospel message. Those are just the geographical settings that Mark organizes his material around. What's important is the gospel *message* – the message that Jesus preached that brings salvation. The three legs of the gospel message are these:

- 1) Jesus has awesome power and authority.
- 2) Jesus came to suffer and die and rise again.
- 3) His command for us to follow him.

Those are the three parts of the gospel message: power, suffering, and discipleship. It's very important that you understand those three legs as we go through the rest of the book, because one of Mark's main purposes in writing this book is to do everything he can to hammer home leg #2, because that's the one people weren't getting. And he's going to show us why they weren't getting it, and what that teaches each one of us about our own ability to understand Christ.

John Mission: Prepare Hearts

The Desert = the Absence of God

So let's go back out to the howling, uninhabited desert. Why the desert?¹ There's a lot of speculation about that, but we don't have to speculate because Mark points us to exactly where we need to go for the answer. What book of the Bible does Mark point us to in v.2? Isaiah. ² It is written in Isaiah the prophet. I think we can divide the first 8 verses of Mark 1 into 3 sections: John's Mission, John's Multitudes, and John's Message. And to understand that first one, John the Baptist's Mission, we need to look at Isaiah 40.

2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— 3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

Mark is actually quoting three different passages of Scripture there, but the main one is the one from Isaiah.² That's the part that mentions the desert.

3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

The Two Parts of Isaiah

That quotation comes from Isaiah ch.40, which is really significant. Isaiah has two very distinct sections. The first 39 chapters happened during Isaiah's lifetime. It's just prophecy after prophecy of doom, announcing coming judgment on Israel. The second half of Isaiah is called the book of comfort. It's all about the restoration God will bring after the judgment.³ So when the ancient Jew got to Isaiah ch.40, he just finished 39 relentless, endless chapters describing the coming judgment. Things are going to be a nightmare for you, your kids, and your grandkids. Very hard news, with vivid descriptions of how horrible it will be.

Then God tells Isaiah to comfort the people. How do you comfort people after you just told them all that? Here's what he says:

Isaiah 40:1 Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins.

Ok, so now Isaiah is jumping ahead to some time way off in the future, after Isaiah would be long dead, and he's speaking to the generation that will be in exile at the end of God's judgment, when the punishment is completed. And then here's the part Mark quotes:

3 A voice of one calling: "In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Road Building

When important people travel, they have advance people go ahead of them and get things ready. If the President comes to Denver, they shut down highways, intersections – they get everything out of his

¹ There is a number of theories. Some say it's supposed to call to mind a new exodus, some say it has something to do with the fact that there is desert between Babylon and Israel, and others say that's just where God likes to meet with his people. None of those theories enjoy any kind of consensus, because the passage doesn't give any specific indication. However, I believe the uses of the word "desert" throughout Isaiah make the meaning clear.

² Very often when rabbis would quote multiple passages, they would only mention one of the writers – whichever one was the one they wanted to focus attention on the most.

³ That makes the division easy to remember because it's just like the Bible. The Bible has 66 books; Isaiah has 66 chapters. The first part of the Bible, the OT, has 39 books. The first part of Isaiah, the judgment portion that happened in the OT, is 39 chapters. The NT has 27 books. The comfort and restoration part of Isaiah has 27 chapters. So Isaiah is like a mini-Bible.

way. They did the same thing in ancient times. Kings would actually have a road-building crew that would go out in advance and smooth out the bumps in the road, or, if it had a lot of twists and turns, they would build a straight road where the king was going.

The greater the king, the more extensive the project. You get an idea of the scale of this project in v.4.

4 Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.

So it's not just filling in potholes and grading the washboard. We're talking engineers who look at I-70 going up over Vail Pass and Eisenhower Pass and they say, "That's too much uphill. That will slow him down – those mountains are going to have to go." They get to the Grand Canyon, "Get some dump trucks in here and fill in that canyon so we have a smooth ride across." The language here is describing a massive road construction project that is on a ridiculous, impossible scale.

Now obviously this is figurative language. When God arrives to save his people, he doesn't really need literal, physical roads. It's a spiritual preparation. What kind of spiritual preparation? Some kind of spiritual road building that, if it doesn't happen, God won't come back to his people in restoration. So what kind of spiritual preparation? Isaiah doesn't say. All we know is that it has to happen before God will move through the desert and come to his people.

So what is the desert? It's very clear if you just read the book of Isaiah. The first time the word *desert* appears in Isaiah it refers to the king of Babylon **who made the world a desert and overthrew its cities** (Isa.14:17). In ch.27 there is a description of the coming judgment on Jerusalem when Babylon destroys them:

Isaiah 27:10 The fortified city stands desolate, an abandoned settlement, forsaken like the desert

Isaiah 64:10 Your sacred cities have become a desert; even Zion is a desert, Jerusalem a desolation.

So the judgment on Israel was for Babylon to come and turn the land flowing with milk and honey into a barren desert. Then, when you get to passages about restoration, listen to how the restoration is described:

Isaiah 32:10 ... the harvest of fruit will not come. ... 13 a land overgrown with thorns and briars ... 14 The fortress will be abandoned, the noisy city deserted; citadel and watchtower will become a wasteland... 15 till the Spirit is poured upon us from on high, and the desert becomes a fertile field, and the fertile field seems like a forest. 16 Justice will dwell in the desert and righteousness live in the fertile field.

God's judgment on Israel is that Babylon will come and turn the place into a desert wasteland, and then when the punishment is concluded, God will come, pour out his Spirit, and the desert will be transformed into a lush, fertile forest. You see that again in ch.35.

Isaiah 35:1 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the desert will rejoice and blossom. ... 2 it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. ... 4 do not fear; your God will come

6 ... Water will gush forth in the desert and streams in the desert. 7 The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And that's just a few examples – there are several others.⁴ So the book of Isaiah is very clear. What is the desert in Isaiah? It is the devastation that came on the people of God as a result of their sin. It's the

⁴ See also Isa.41:18-19, 42:11, 43:19-20, 51:3.

wilderness that you are in when God withdraws from you. It's talking about far more than a physical wilderness; it's a spiritual wilderness. God withdraws his presence, and all of life dries up and becomes a hostile environment for spiritual existence. And so after 39 chapters of describing that devastation and desolation, you get to ch.40 and there is this voice calling for someone to build a road through the desert so that God will come back.

Why doesn't God just come right now? Because there are some mountains in the way. There are some huge, gaping canyons and treacherous terrain impeding his approach, and so someone has to come along and flatten those mountains and fill in the canyons and pave over the rugged terrain and make a highway in the desert of God's judgment – a highway that God will travel when he returns to restore his people.

Why does God need a highway? He doesn't – God doesn't need anything. But he won't come and restore the people until that highway is in place. As long as those mountains and canyons are there, he won't come.

The Messenger

What are these mountains and canyons? And who is going to remove them and build this road? Isaiah doesn't tell us, which is why Mark included the other two OT quotations – one from Exodus and one from Malachi.

Mark 1:2 ... “Behold, I will send my messenger ahead of you... (that's Exodus), who will prepare your way” (that's from Malachi).

Who is the messenger in Exodus?

Exodus 23:20 “Behold, I am sending a messenger ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.

That messenger was an angel that God sent to protect the people by destroying their enemies and making sure they made it to the Promised Land.

How about the one in Malachi?

Malachi 3:1 “Behold, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire

Malachi is saying, “Remember that angel from the exodus who protected God's people? There's going to be another exodus, where God brings his people into the ultimate promised land, but this time, instead of the messenger destroying your enemies, he's going to throw you into the fire to be refined. Why? Because that's necessary to protect you from God's wrath. Skip ahead to ch.4.

Malachi 4:5 “See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. 6 He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”

God is going to come in judgment first, then bring his blessing. And the messenger's job is to get people ready so that they won't be swept away in the judgment. If you imagine a city that is rebelling against the king, and so the king comes with his army to destroy that city. But he's a merciful king, so he sends a messenger ahead of them to warn the city and plead with the people to drop their arms and join his side before he arrives. Anyone who does that will be given full amnesty and forgiveness, and will receive all the glories and blessings of that kingdom. But anyone who refuses will be destroyed in the judgment. And what is it, exactly, that this Elijah figure is going to do to get people ready? He's going to restore people's hearts. He's going to do something to deal with the sin and rebellion in people's hearts.

That is the very last thing God said to his people, followed by 400 years of silence from heaven. No prophets. No word from God. For 400 years, ringing in the ears of the people, was this promise that God

would send this Elijah figure to prepare the people's hearts for God's coming. They were eagerly watching for that, because they knew they were still in the desert. They came back from exile after 70 years, but that was nothing close to what God had promised in the second half of Isaiah.⁵ They were still in the desert and they knew it.

John as Elijah

Now, with all that background, can you see why Mark has the opening shot out in the desert? That's where the story about Jesus begins – with Israel in a spiritual desert. God is distant, and his blessings and restoration and the glorious kingdom are a long way off. And the people are longing for that Elijah messenger to come, build that road so God will come back, pour out his Spirit, and turn their desert into a flourishing, fertile garden and forest. So then Mark calls all that to mind, and then look what he says: 2 It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"— 3 "a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'" 4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert John the Baptist is the guy. He is the promised Elijah. That's implied in v.4, and confirmed down in v.6.

Prophet Costume

6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

Why are we given that information? There are a lot of things about John the Baptist I would love to know. If I could ask any 2 questions about him, I think last on my list would be his hairy wardrobe and his quirky vegan diet.

Whenever the Bible tells you about someone's clothes, it's not just to add color to your imagination, like when you're reading a novel and the writer goes on and on describing the appearance of each character. That's not the purpose. It's always to tell you something about that person's character or identity. And in this case, there can be no mistaking what the reference is. He's dressed like Elijah. The opening chapter of 2 Kings gives the account of Elijah sending a message to the king to let him know he was going to die.

2 Kings 1:7 The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?" 8 They replied, "He was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist." The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite."

That's how distinctive Elijah's outfit was. It's like Daniel Boone's coonskin cap or Abraham Lincoln's stovepipe hat and beard. As soon as you see it, a very specific person comes to mind. On Halloween, if you put a garment of hair and a leather belt on your kid and sent him out trick-or-treating, everyone would immediately say, "Oh cute! Look at the little Elijah."⁶

The Mountains are Unrepentance

Now remember – we were asking, "What are the mountains and valleys that are preventing God from coming back to the people?" The forerunner's job is to eliminate those mountains and valleys. So if we watch and see what John does, then we'll know what the mountains and valleys are. So what does John do?

⁵ When Babylon came and destroyed them, they were carried off into captivity for 70 years, and at the end of the 70 years some of them came back to the land. That was a partial restoration from the judgment. And they built a new temple, such as it was. But it was nothing like the one that got destroyed. And after that they were under the control of one nation after another.

⁶ Luke states that explicitly. **Luke 1:17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah...** That's what Luke says, but remember, Mark writes with a paintbrush instead of a pen, so instead of spelling it out like that, he just paints us a picture of John the Baptist walking around in an Elijah costume.

Mark 1:4 And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

What are the mountains and valleys that prevent God from coming? Unrepentance and unforgiven sin. What is the road building project that has to happen before God comes? Bring people to a point of **repentance** and **forgiveness of sins**. That's what's causing this spiritual desert to persist.

Unprepared Hearts Won't Understand

John the Baptist had to come first, because unprepared hearts can't accept the truth about Jesus. And that's exactly what we see happen later on in the book – the ability to understand depends on the condition of the heart.

Mark 6:52 for they had not understood about the loaves; their hearts were hardened.

Mark 8:17 ... Jesus asked them ... Do you still not see or understand? Are your hearts hardened?

In ch.3 Jesus asks the people the easiest religious question imaginable.

Mark 3:4 Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?"

It's hard to imagine an easier question than that, but they couldn't get it.
Why?

5 He looked around at them in anger ... deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts

If your heart isn't prepared, you can't even figure out 2+2 of truth about Jesus. And so in his infinite mercy, before coming to bring salvation and final judgment, God sends a forerunner to prepare people's hearts so that they will be the ones being saved rather than the ones being judged.

Rebuke to Judaism

So imagine you were there. You're being jostled by this huge crowd coming out of the Denver area making your way on foot 30 miles out to Keenesburg. And you're huffing and puffing because it's pretty rough going, descending about 4000 feet in elevation. You've never seen anything like this in your life. And as you look around as see the masses of people streaming out to the desert – walking away from Jerusalem into the wilderness, you're struck with the irony of that. The OT promises that someday the gentiles will come streaming in to Jerusalem to see its magnificence, and to worship God. But now here the Jews are streaming out of Jerusalem into the desert. This is a cleansing not just of individual hearts, but of the whole nation.

And it's a stinging rebuke to the religious order of the day. You would think that if God were going to come visit his people in some great way, it would begin in the Holy Place in the Temple. You would think the forerunner would be the high priest, or an esteemed scribe or a powerful government official. Certainly not some strange, 30-year-old, locust-eating hermit in the desert.

Repentance

You finally arrive at the place, and the entire hillside is covered with people. A lot of them were soaking wet. The rest were waiting in line. And when you get close enough to hear, it was amazing to listen to one person after another after another confessing their sins – soldiers, peasants, merchants, tax collectors, fishermen, young, old – publicly confessing specific incidents of stealing, lying, sexual sin, selfishness, greed, coveting. It wasn't anything like what you see on a typical sabbath in the synagogue.

You're used to religion being all about rituals and traditions and actions you do for religious observance. You don't hear people come into the synagogue confessing sins. This is a truly astonishing thing.

This is such an important point for Mark, because remember – Mark gives the gospel in three parts – the 3-legged gospel. And his great concern is that people weren't getting leg #2 Jesus is powerful – everyone accepts that. Jesus calls us to follow him – people are even fairly eager to do that, up to a point. But that second leg – Jesus as the suffering servant, that's where everyone chokes.

They choke there because they want a savior who will save them from temporal trouble and hardship, not a savior who will save them from their own sin. So God sends John to call people to repentance, because when they confess their sins and repent, that makes them realize what kind of salvation they need. Salvation from sin. When you realize that's the kind of salvation you need, then you're open to a Savior who suffers and dies in your place to pay the penalty for your sin. But if you don't see your sin and guilt as a major problem, then you'll just want a savior who can rescue you from trouble and hardship, and so you're not going to be interested in a messiah who suffers and dies and calls you to follow in his steps. Do you see that? People are not ready to listen to leg #2 until they stop looking for a savior to rescue them from trouble and start looking for a savior to deal with their sin problem.

Now, is all this confession true repentance? Will it last? Will the people of Israel embrace Jesus as the Messiah? Mark is going to hold us in suspense with all those questions. He'll show us the answer as he continues through the book, but for now, he just wants us to see the overwhelming positive response to John's ministry. And that brings us to point #2: John's Multitudes.

John's Multitudes: Legitimacy Established

5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

When Mark says **all the people of Jerusalem**, that's not intended in an absolute way. It's used in more of a colloquial way – like if I said, "A couple weeks ago, I-25 north was all jammed up because everyone was going up to Wyoming to see the eclipse." That doesn't mean every last soul in existence – it's just a figure of speech designed to call to your mind an image of huge masses of people.

The crowds going out to John were overwhelming, which is amazing if you think about it. Think about if you had the task of getting masses of people to leave their homes, walk 30 miles into the desert, and publicly confess their sins and then let you baptize them. How would you go about doing that? If you just went out to the Jordan and put up a big sign that said, "Free baptisms," how many customers do you think you'd get? Probably none – especially when you consider that baptism wasn't a thing back then. Jews didn't just get baptized. There was a baptism ritual for Gentiles who wanted to convert to become Jews, but Jewish people were never baptized. Telling a Jew that he needed to be baptized would be to imply that that Jew was just as unclean as a Gentile, and needed to be cleansed to become one of the people of God. That message would be an incredibly tough sell in first Century Judaism – or at any time in Jewish history.

But that was John's big thing – he's always called John the Baptist. He's John the Baptist. That's unique. Everyone else in the NT, if they want to identify who they are, they either say the father, or where he's from. James, son of Zebedee. Or Jesus of Nazareth. And John had a really famous, important father – the high priest, Zechariah. But it's never John, son of Zechariah. Why was John called "the Baptist"? Was he the original Southern Baptist? No. It should be translated John the baptizer. That was his identity. He was doing something no one else ever did, and it characterized his life work more than anything else. It was a massive indictment on the people, basically saying, "All of you Jews need to be cleansed," and yet John had people coming out in droves. God was doing something unique. Something awesome in people's hearts.

John must have been an amazing preacher. Because he didn't have a populist message. He wasn't out there preaching about how you can get rich and prosperous if you have faith, or how to live your best life now. This is a guy who wears burlap and eats grasshoppers and lives in the desert. The other gospels

give us glimpses of his preaching, and it wasn't anything that would normally have a wide appeal. He called people snakes, warned about the coming wrath, rebuked sin, called people out – not the kind of thing that normally draws a big crowd.

I think John probably performed miracles, because he says Jesus will come and be more powerful than he was. For that to mean anything, John had to be extremely powerful, right? If I sent out a press release saying someone was going to come after me that is even more powerful than Darrell Ferguson, I don't think it would make any headlines. Millions of people are more powerful than Darrell Ferguson. John doesn't say, "The Messiah is going to come and be even more powerful than Moses! More powerful than Elijah and Elisha combined!" No, he says the strongest thing he could say, "He's going to be even more powerful than me." When people were trying to explain how Jesus performed so many miracles, they concluded, "He must be John the Baptist back from the dead." So John was incredibly powerful. Did he work miracles? It sure sounds like it⁷ —although that would be hard to reconcile with John 10:41, where the people said John did not perform miracles. Either those people were mistaken, or John exhibited his power in non-miraculous ways. Either way, for John's comment here to mean anything, he had to have been a man of awesome power. And he was incredibly famous at age 30. In fact, the historian Josephus, who lived back then, actually spends more time writing about John the Baptist than about Jesus. John may have been more famous.

Established: John's from God

He was an incredibly powerful figure, and whether it was through miracles or some other way, we know for sure that the consensus was pretty much unanimous: John is a prophet from God. God sends a man and makes it so crystal clear that he is a true prophet from God that no one can deny it. It wasn't just some little cult following, it wasn't one particular sect of people – everybody knew, without question, this man was a true prophet.

God was setting the people up to basically paint themselves into a corner. They all affirm, without question: "Yes, this man is from God and he is a true prophet." Then, once that's established, John points to Jesus and says, "There's the Messiah." What do you do if you've already affirmed John is speaking for God, and then John points to someone as Messiah? You either have to accept what John is saying and follow that one he pointed to, or you have to admit that you're just not interested in listening to God. There's no option of accepting John but not Jesus, and everyone accepts John.

So what are they going to do when it comes to Jesus? We'll see. John holds us in suspense on that for now. At this point he just wants to establish, for the record, Israel believed John to be a prophet of God. And they never stopped believing that, by the way. Just days before his death Jesus asked this question:

Mark 11:30 John's baptism—was it from heaven, or from men? Tell me!" 31 They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' 32 But if we say, 'From men'...." (They feared the people, for everyone held that John really was a prophet.)

So Mark wants that on the record right from the beginning of his book: the people knew without question that John was from God.

John's Message: Jesus Bestows the Spirit

And now that everyone has agreed that John is a true prophet, look what he does:

7 And this was his message:

⁷ See also Mark 6:14 where Jesus is assumed to be John because of his miracles.

John's Mission: prepare hearts by calling people to repentance. John's Multitudes: the people all affirmed John was a true prophet. And once they did that, we get John's Message.

7 And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

John was the greatest man who had ever lived up to his time. And he points to Jesus and says, "He is infinitely greater. I baptize with water, he's going to come and drown you with the Holy Spirit." The greatest men in the OT were men who had the Holy Spirit come upon them from time to time. Jesus will not only have the Spirit come upon him; he will be in charge of *bestowing* the Spirit. He's the one who will bring the great restoration and kingdom of the second half of Isaiah. "Wait, I thought Isaiah said that will be God himself." Mark's answer: "Exactly!"

Are the people going to accept that – or even understand that? It all depends on the condition of their hearts and whether they are repentant. The heart that holds on to some sin becomes incapable of understanding the truth about Christ, and incapable of accepting it, and so the mountains and valleys remain, and God stays at a distance. The wheels of the divine vehicle only drive on the pavement of repentance. The Messianic rescue only happens for the repentant. Only the repentant will understand who the Messiah is. Only the repentant will be able to accept his teaching. Only the repentant will come to him the right way.

Conclusion: Is Your Heart Prepared?

And what is true of the nation of Israel is also true for individuals. There's a lot more to say about Jesus' baptism, so we'll pick up the narrative there next time. But for now, let's just ask ourselves this question: Is my heart prepared? Have you ever seen that drawing that, if you look at it from one perspective you see an old lady, and from another perspective you see a beautiful young woman? That's how Mark writes his gospel. He paints two pictures of Jesus simultaneously. One is of the mighty, spectacular, amazing, glorious, divine King of kings who has awesome authority over all things and will rule in wisdom and compassion forever and ever. The other is a disappointing, awkward, even embarrassing character who you just can't bring yourself to trust or follow. One is real and the other isn't, but which one you see is determined by the condition of your heart. Mark's portrait of Jesus, if your heart is prepared, will bring you to your knees in worship and joy. But if your heart is not prepared, it will be confusing, upsetting, and troubling. Whenever you have a hard time either understanding or accepting or believing something in Scripture, always search your heart to see if there is some attitude, some desire, some motive, something in there that is clinging to a sin.



Clinging to a sin will not only prevent understanding and acceptance, but it will also keep God at a distance, because unrepentant sins are the mountains and valleys that keep God from coming into your desert and making it a flourishing garden. So ask yourself, are the mountains that keep God at a distance still there, or have they been flattened by thorough repentance?

The word *repent* means to turn back to God. When you sin, you move away from God, and repentance does a 180 and starts moving back toward God. So it's a whole lot more than just stopping the sin. You can stop the sin completely and not have any repentance. You haven't repented until you've started taking steps back toward God - doing all you know how to do to draw near to him. That will pave the highway – meaning it will prepare you to be receptive when God does come back to you. James 4 is a key passage that teaches us about repentance.

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you.

When you turn from sin and start moving back toward seeking closeness with God, that doesn't get you back to God, but it does move God's heart to return to you. And what does that look like? Just read the rest of the verse.

James 4:8 Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

Repentance involves humbling yourself, turning from the sin, seeking holiness and a single-hearted seeking after God. You turn to the Scriptures, seek God in prayer, immerse yourself in fellowship. Seek counseling to help you change. Read a good book on how to overcome that sin. Listen to some sermons on it. Don't mess around. Nothing is more important than doing whatever it takes to draw near to God.

Malachi 3:7 ... Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.