

## “Prepare the Way of the Lord” – Mark 1:1-8

By now, you pretty much know that I like to preach verse by verse through entire books of the Bible. I believe this expository style is the absolute best way for God to speak through preaching. So, I endeavor to read distinctly from the word, give the sense, explain the meaning and trust God the Holy Spirit to speak it to your hearts. I really don't have anything worthwhile to offer you except that which comes from the inspired word of God.

As we approached the end of our journey through the two Pauline letters to the Thessalonians, I spent quite a bit of time praying about where we should go next. I thought about going to Romans, because it's one of my favorite books, but after much prayer, I firmly believe that the Lord has led me to the Gospel of Mark. So, here we are.

Mark, or John Mark, is an interesting fellow. We read about him in the Book of Acts. His name is first mentioned during the description of Peter's miraculous escape from prison.

*So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of **John whose surname was Mark**, where many were gathered together praying. (Acts 12:12)*

John is a Jewish name. Mark is a Greek name. In Scripture, he is sometimes referred to as Mark, sometimes as John, and sometimes as both. In that culture, and in ours, it's not unusual for an individual to be known by more than one name.

We know Mark was a cousin of Barnabas. We read about that in Colossians:

*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him), (Colossians 4:10)*

He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on that very first missionary journey. Now, Mark wasn't a pastor, or an evangelist, or a preacher, or a teacher; we never read about him in any of those contexts. He apparently was quite useful as an assistant to those ministries. But when the going got tough, Mark got going. Not in a positive way. He left; He bailed.

*Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John, departing from them, returned to Jerusalem. (Acts 13:13)*

John Mark was a deserter and it certainly didn't sit well with Paul. When it came time to go on another missionary journey, Barnabas wanted to take Mark. Paul said, “No way ... he's a coward and a deserter.”

*Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus; (Acts 15:39)*

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story. As Paul was facing execution, he wrote in his second letter to Timothy:

*Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. (2 Timothy 4:11)*

That strained relationship caused by Mark's desertion had been resolved and at the end of his life, Paul considered Mark to be a valuable partner in ministry.

The Gospel of Mark is short, action-oriented and straight to the point. It seems to have been written for a Roman audience, folks who were interested in what happened in the

life of Jesus and not so much about the deep theological foundation of what happened. It is concise, and it features extensive use of the word “immediately”.

Now, Mark was not one of the 12 Apostles, but he was closely associated with Peter. And comparing the language of Mark with Peter’s speeches and sermons recorded in Acts, scholars find Mark’s use of language to be very close to that of Peter’s. Mark apparently spent a great deal of time hanging out with Peter. o we believe that Mark’s gospel actually records Peter’s memories of Jesus ministry. This is implied in Peter’s second epistle where in chapter 1, beginning with verse 13, Peter writes:

*Yes, I think it is right, as long as I am in this tent, to stir you up by reminding you, knowing that shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me. **Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease.** (2 Peter 1:13-15)*

Many scholars think that the reminder he speaks of is the Gospel according to Mark. Mark was Peter’s interpreter.

Mark, as we will soon see, doesn’t spend any time at all talking about the first 30 years of Jesus’ life. There is no account of His miraculous birth, His early years growing up in Nazareth, His parents ... nothing at all about where He came from. He starts abruptly as Jesus is about to begin His public ministry. So, verse 1:

*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)*

There is a little bit of debate among scholars as to what this first sentence comprises. Some think it’s just the title but I think the word “Beginning” is significant. Mark begins his gospel with the ministry of John the Baptist. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus Christ and as Mark reports, Jesus is the Son of God. He is completely human being born of a woman, but He is also completely God. He has existed from eternity past He will always be.

The word “gospel”, is the Greek *euaggelion* (εὐαγγέλιον) It refers to a good message, or you could say, good news. And the Gospel most certainly is good news. It’s the best news ever because through Jesus, we can achieve forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with Almighty God. We can move from being God’s enemies to being God’s family. This was God’s plan all along, which is why Mark begins with a quotation from our Old Testament.

*As it is written in the Prophets: "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU." "THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS: 'PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD; MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" (Mark 1:2-3)*

Mark is quoting from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. I’d like to read the context of the quote from Malachi.

*"Behold, I send My messenger, And he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, Will suddenly come to His temple, Even the Messenger of the covenant, In whom you delight. Behold, He is coming," Says the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 3:1)*

Both Isaiah and Malachi saw that there would be an individual who would herald the arrival of Messiah. He would be a prophet. In fact, John the Baptist was the last of the

Old Testament prophets. (I know he shows up in the New Testament, but he ministered under the Old Covenant.) Do you know what Jesus said about Him?

*For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:28)*

That's really high praise, but Jesus says there is something even better. Our Lord mediates a New Covenant. The New Covenant is not a covenant of Law or works, it is a Covenant of faith. We are not saved because we are obedient to the Law of God, and that's a very good thing because not one of us could keep it. We are saved because Jesus was obedient to the Law ... and to death. And by His stripes we are healed.

There's another thing Jesus said about John the Baptist.

*For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come. (Matthew 11:13-14)*

What does that mean? Jesus refers again to Malachi.

*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse. (Malachi 4:5-6)*

I find it interesting that not even John knew this about himself. When the Jewish leaders asked who he was, here is his answer:

*And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" He said: "I am 'THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS: "MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD," ' as the prophet Isaiah said." (John 1:21-23)*

John was preparing the way for Jesus' earthly ministry. Before a person can be saved, they must be made aware of what they need to be saved from. They need to understand that they are in peril. And that was John the Baptist's role.

*John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. (Mark 1:4)*

The word "repentance" involves a radical change of mind and change of heart which results in a radical change in behavior. Basically, John was letting these people know that they were sinners and that God would inevitably execute judgment. That judgment is horrible and lasts forever. They were in serious, eternal trouble and so are we. John said, "You guys need to repent."

As part of his ministry, he was baptizing them in the Jordan River. Matthew says that the people were ...

*... baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins. (Matthew 3:6)*

We'll look into it more next week, but this baptism would have been a really radical idea to the Jews. Baptism was something they did to Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. You didn't baptize Jews ... they thought they were already clean because of their heredity. They were wrong!

In order to prepare for the coming Lord, they had to make His paths straight. That means they had to remove any impediments to His coming. They had to provide the Lord ready

access to their hearts and their lives. They had to make straight whatever was crooked, that is, not in line with His holy will. Obstacles had to be removed, obstacles such as self-righteousness, pride, love of the world's goods, greed, slander, cruelty, smug complacency. It is just as true today. In order for someone to be saved, they need to understand their desperate situation.

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:23)*

*And the wages of sin is eternal death. (Romans 6:23)*

You have to understand that you are completely incapable of living a life that pleases God. You must confess that you are a sinner and you must come to want Jesus more than anything else in this life.

So, the baptism of John was a visible representation of dying to their old life, being buried, and then being resurrected to a new life that pleases God. Folks were coming from miles around to hear his message, to confess their sins and to submit to baptism.

*Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. (Mark 1:5)*

Those of you who have taken the Bibliology and How to Study the Bible course will recognize this as a figure of speech. It's a hyperbole. It doesn't mean that every single soul who lived in those regions was getting baptized by John but it does mean that he was drawing huge crowds.

No doubt that most were sincere in this, but not all. In fact, many were just going out to see the show. What's all the buzz about? Even John recognized this.

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matthew 3:7)*

See, John was a character. He was a bit of a throw-back.

*Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. (Mark 1:6)*

He lived and dressed the part of the Old-Testament prophet because that is what He was. After 400 silent years, God was speaking through a man and for a short time, he was the greatest show in Judea. But he absolutely knew what his place was. Look at verse 7:

*And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1:7-8)*

Here is the problem with John's baptism. It couldn't save anyone. It could make people aware of their sinful state. It could make them realize that they needed to confess and repent. But the water in the Jordan was just water. All they were getting from it was ... wet. No matter how sincere someone is about confessing and repenting from their sin, they still inhabit their fallen flesh and your flesh cannot help but sin.

*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)*

But Jesus came to baptize with the Holy Spirit, Living Water. Without the Holy Spirit, you cannot even see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3) but with the Holy Spirit, well, listen to what Jesus said:

*However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. (John 16:13)*

Jesus, through the work of the Spirit, writes His truth on our hearts. He changes us from the inside out. We will never be perfectly conformed to His will in this life, but He is working in us to both will and do for His good pleasure. And one day, with resurrected, sinless bodies, we will stand before His throne, glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever.

But until that day, you need to be about the business of getting ready. You need to prepare the way of the Lord. You need to make His paths straight in your life.

*... let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

It starts by giving your life over to Jesus. “Jesus, You are my Lord and my God. I believe you died for my sins. I believe you were raised from the grave and are alive right now. I want to have a living relationship with You.”

Then it continues as you actively seek out His will ... and then submit to it. That’s what this Bible is for.

*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)*

Make straight His paths in your life. Prepare the way of the Lord!