

A SERVANT OF THE SERVANT

Mark 1:1-8

Last week we began our study in the gospel of Mark and learned that he is writing to Gentile (non-Jewish) believers in Rome undergoing systematic persecution. And I want to ask you to use your imagination this morning by putting yourself in their shoes for a bit. Pretend one day as you are gathered in someone's house to worship, since that's what they did back then is typically gathered in houses because they didn't have church buildings yet (kind of like what some of you are doing today), pretend that some authorities come into your house and they tie you up and drag you out and take you to local governor for a trial. And at this trial you come before the governor and the governor asks you whether or not you are a Christian, and how you answer that question depends on whether or not you live much longer. One Roman historian (Tacitus) described the terrible treatment of Christians during this time by saying that, "Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination (lightpoles), when daylight had expired. Nero [emperor] offered his gardens for the spectacle [as if] exhibiting a show in the circus..."¹ That's what it was like to be a Christian. Your persecution became a spectacle, a form of entertainment. So with that in mind now, counting the costs, how do you respond to: "Are you a Christian?" If you say no, it means freedom to go home, freedom to do business in the city... just deny Christ and burn a little incense to the Roman gods or Caesar and go back to living your life. However, if you say yes, you face persecution, jail time, no ability to trade or do business, and your agonizing death became an entertainment spectacle. If you said yes and admitted it, they would typically ask you twice and give you one more opportunity to decide. "Are you a Christian?"

Just like that, there are many biblical and historical examples we could recall of men and women who were called to speak on God's behalf or stand for the truth with their lives at stake or their livelihood on the line. It's not even foreign to many believers today. Even today, Christians will be persecuted for their faith around the world. When Mark writes this gospel, that's what we need to think. Lives are on the line. Livelihoods are at stake. And Mark wants to encourage these believers to stand for Christ – to do what Christ did and serve their hearts out until the end, regardless of the cost. The key verse of Mark we saw last week was 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." Mark encourages his readers in Rome by using 40% of this book to write about Christ's last 8 days – known as the Passion of Christ. And He challenges them to be whole-hearted followers. Mark 8:34 which says, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Mark wanted them to endure, even if it meant taking up their own cross.

And other than Christ, maybe no one exemplified the life of self-denial and servanthood for Christ better than John the Baptist. Even Jesus said of John the Baptist, "Among those born of women there is no one greater than John." Jesus said John was more than a prophet according to Matthew 11:9. John was the man God chose to point people to Jesus just before Jesus began public ministry. He was a man who, in a world of abundant religious hypocrisy, had to stand and preach the truth and would end up literally losing his head for it. His head would end up on a platter. He is a man who would serve as a great and encouraging example to believers undergoing some of the worst persecution this world has seen, like Mark's audience. **He was a servant of the servant and we can learn a lot from him today.** Let's read about what Mark has to say about John from verses 1-8.

The first thing we want to point out is the introduction in verse 1.

I. THE INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL (V. 1)

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” And that’s it for an introduction. This is a book about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It’s short and sweet. It’s to the point and that’s characteristic of the whole book. He doesn’t begin with a genealogy like Matthew or the incarnation and Christmas story like Luke or John. He gets right down to the business with the goal he has in mind of teaching us to be servants like Christ. Remember, Mark is not writing down everything he knows about Christ – he has a purpose behind his writing and that is to show Christ as a Servant. I mentioned last week this is what the Roman audiences preferred. They were pragmatic and didn’t mess around. They liked action-packed entertainment (as their coliseums suggest) and Mark is writing an action-packed book to appeal to that audience. He uses the word “**immediately**” or “**at once**” 42 times showing Jesus Christ as someone who is always on the move – always preaching, teaching, healing, serving.

❖ **Mark shows Christ as constantly pouring Himself out for the sake of others.**

Always compassionately and obediently and faithfully doing the will of the Father. And Mark does that to challenge us to pour ourselves out for others as well. To deny self and become servants. So this is “The beginning of the gospel [or good news] of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” to Mark and his purpose. Up until now, Jesus has led a fairly normal life as a Jewish carpenter. He hasn’t made any big waves yet. He hasn’t done His first miracle. But He’s about to. And John is the man God chose to point people to Him right before He began making waves. In the verses 2-3 we see John was even prophesied about hundreds of years earlier (700 years!).

II. THE PROPHECY ABOUT JOHN’S MINISTRY (VV. 2-3).

“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’” I want to point out that these two verses are actually a combination of two prophecies – Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 (& possibly Ex. 23:20). Mark only mentions the Isaiah part of the prophecy because it was a common practice to only mention the dominant prophecy.

But this prophecy mentioned by Mark is a prophecy that states that just before the long-awaited Savior comes, God would send a **messenger** ahead of Him – someone to alert the people of it. He wants the people aware of His Messiah’s coming! Remember this is something the people, and Jewish people in particular (Abraham’s descendants), have been waiting on since the Promise to Abraham and since the Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3 when God promised a savior. And at this point in history, Israel hasn’t had a prophet in 400 years! It’s known as the 400 “silent years” between the OT & NT, not because God wasn’t working during that time – He clearly did many things to prepare for Christ’s coming – but for the reason that He hadn’t given Israel a prophetic voice during it. And I think the reason for that is, is because God wanted John to stand out – for Israel to recognize that there hasn’t been a genuine prophet like this in a long time.

And John made a great impact! I liked what Ray Stedman noted, this guy had a bulldozer ministry! His job was to bulldoze a path in the wilderness for Christ’s coming. Whenever you make a road in the wilderness you have to lower the hills and bring the valleys up and clear the obstacles out of the way. And these obstacles and hills and valleys weren’t literal – they were spiritual.

❖ **John prepared the people spiritually for Christ’s coming.**

During John’s time, the people were in a **spiritual wilderness** – desolate like the desert he was preaching in. And through his preaching, John leveled the hills of religious hypocrisy and pride and

sinful rebellion. But he also brought up those who were in spiritual valleys because of the religious system beating them down and weighing them down and not telling what they needed to hear, which was grace and forgiveness. John was honest about sin, and they appreciated that, but he also brought people good tidings of good news (Lk 3:16). And because of it, people were willing to walk 20 miles into the wilderness to hear him, as we see in verses 4-8. Look now at the content of John's ministry.

III. **THE CONTENT OF JOHN'S MINISTRY (VV. 4-8)**

"John the Baptist [or baptizer] appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, saying, 'After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'" One of the things that we have to do to really understand the **content** of John's ministry is to think about the religious **context** of the day. And in the context of that day, the contrast between what John was preaching and teaching and doing and what the religious leaders like the Pharisees were preaching and teaching and doing – let's just say they were totally different.

John is preaching life-giving truth in an age where Israel is drowning in religious hypocrisy. The Jewish religious elite had this theological concept called *zekhut avot*, or "the merits of the fathers."² Basically, it was taught that if you were connected to the forefathers of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you were protected from divine punishment based on their merits. So because you're a descendant of theirs, basically, you're good to go! Salvation was assumed. No need to repent or confess sins – just keep doing religious things. The Bible portrays them as arrogant. They didn't see their sinful pride or confess it. They thanked God that they weren't sinners like the Gentiles and tax-collectors. And because they didn't see their sin, Jesus said their sin remained (Jn. 9:41). They lived as if they weren't separated from God and would point to their luxurious lifestyle, being dressed in the finest robes and what not, and they'd talk about how it was a sure sign of God's blessing. Kind of like the prosperity preachers today, saying, "God wants you healthy and wealthy." Yeah, well, tell that to persecuted Christians in Rome, right? Mark didn't tell them that. And neither did John.

But everything about John was different! His lifestyle, his message, his ministry. It was all different.

A. He modeled a message through his *lifestyle*. (v. 6)

Like some of the other OT prophets, God had him live and dress in such a way that his very life sent a message to the people. His location. His clothes. His diet. He didn't dress in the finest clothes like religious rabbis in the city. He was out in the wilderness. He dressed in camels hair and a plain leather belt like Elijah. He lived off of the land, eating locusts and honey, being dependent on God. And He wasn't out there to practice "social distancing" – it was all **symbolic** for the people. He didn't tell everyone to dress like him and eat like him and live in the wilderness, but he did it **to teach a spiritual lesson**. Prophets didn't just teach by preaching, they taught through their living and their actions. One thing he was teaching was that fine robes and fancy headwear and luxurious life is not a sign of God's blessing or that someone's close to God. But he also silently preached separation from the world and separation to God. He didn't depend on the world, he depended on God. You don't see a man exalting himself like they were used to, but humbling himself. There's so much he was modeling that the people needed as a vivid and unforgettable illustration.

B. He preached a two-sided message. (vv. 7-8)

The guy didn't do one miracle. All he did was preach. He cried out – crying in the wilderness – carries with it passion and emotion – that men and women must repent. That's the first part of his message was the **BAD NEWS** part. His message wasn't that people are okay and basically good – that if you have Abraham as your father, you're good to go. His message was totally different. He preached that men are sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God. That God is holy and man is not and man must repent because of it. He must **confess** his sinfulness. It's an earnest message we still preach today – men need to know that they are sinners before they see their need for a Savior. John was preaching that it's more than ceremonial and religious works that separated a man from God – it is sin that separates a man from God. We are sinners by nature and unless the sin issue is dealt with, then the religious works mean nothing, no matter how many you do. Church going and religious prayers and religious works – all of that mean nothing without genuine repentance. Even OT rites like circumcision were regarded as worthless to God if the heart itself wasn't circumcised to God (Ezek. 44:7-9; Jer. 4:4; Lev. 26:41). There's still a dangerous mindset like this in the church today: folks thinking that since they grew up in church and their parents are Christians, they're saved; or if I just do religious works like give money or get baptized then I'll be saved. But there's no change in them. Why? Because they didn't really confront the sin. They just tried covering it up with religious works. But John taught people to confess and confront sin.

There's several specific examples of John preaching this. When members of the Sanhedrin came to investigate John, he warned them, saying, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the tree; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Matt. 3:7-10). Remember, these guys didn't think they were potential subjects of wrath. They had Abraham as their father. John confronts them and says, bear good fruit in keeping with repentance.

John told people to do what is contrary to their sin nature a lot. In Luke 3:10, he told the **crowds** who were gathering to listen to him and asked him what to do, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." That's an important message for us isn't it? In a coronavirus world where everyone's hoarding TP, he might say, "If any man has two rolls of toilet paper, share with him who has none!" To the **tax collectors** who were coming to be baptized, and who were known for extorting more money than they were required too, he said, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to do." To the **soldiers** who abused their office by abusing the people they had occupation over, he said, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages." He's telling them to do something contrary to what people in that office normally did. To confess it and forsake it. And that's what repentance boils down too. You stop ignoring your sins and start seeing them. You stop blaming others for your sin and making excuses and you take responsibility for yourself.

That doesn't mean that John was teaching that if you just reform your behavior and do good things you will be good enough to go to heaven. No one can be good enough to get to heaven. We all need forgiveness and abundant grace and that is the **GOOD NEWS** side of his message. The good tidings he also brought to the people (Lk. 3:18). To those who acknowledged their sin and looked to the Savior, he let them know about forgiveness of sins (v. 4). And that's what we do today. There is bad news, yes: "For the wages of sin is death," but the good news is that "the free gift of God is

eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:23). Sin has been paid for and eternal life in heaven with God is offered freely to those who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior.

So we’ve looked at his lifestyle and message. The third thing John did was he baptized people.

C. He administered a baptism of repentance. (vv. 4-5)

Baptism was not something Jews were strangers too and most of these people from Jerusalem and Judea were Jews. People here were well-acquainted with purity ritual washings where they would immerse themselves. They also knew of a Jewish proselyte/convert baptism – basically, if someone wasn’t Jewish and wanted to identify with the Jewish beliefs and the God of Israel, they would baptize them as a way of identifying with the Jews and their God – it was to be immersed in their teaching and their God. But Jews didn’t think they needed this baptism that Gentiles took. And so what’s interesting is that John’s baptism is actually closest to the Gentile baptism than any other form of baptism. So for a Jew to undergo John’s baptism, might be for them to recognize that they’re no better than Gentiles. And by the way it’s out in the wilderness is likely illustrating that they’re no better than their unfaithful fathers who despised God in the wilderness. There’s a lot of imagery taking place here. NT scholar William Lane wrote: “The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God.”³ Lots of imagery and symbolism taking place through this ministry.

One thing to point out is that John’s baptism was unique. It’s a little similar to a believer’s baptism but it’s also different because those who were baptized by John later received a believer’s baptism by Paul when they understood the full gospel message, Jesus as Savior. Those who were baptized by John were saying I’m repenting and preparing to meet the Messiah and I’m going to identify with whoever John says the Messiah is that is coming. But today we’re identify with the Messiah who already came and died for our sins and was buried and rose again. Believer’s baptism that we practice pictures burial and resurrection, a dying to self and being raised to new life with Christ. It is an external washing, symbolic of an internal washing that has taken place by the Spirit of God. And like John says, the Spirit baptism is much greater than the water baptism.

But in a complimentary passage to this one, we find a third baptism in the same context. Not water or Spirit, but a baptism of fire. According to Luke 3:16, John said, “As for Me I baptize you with water; but One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to untie the thong of His sandals; He will baptize you with the **Holy Spirit and fire**. His winnowing fork is in His hand to thoroughly clear His threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into His barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” There’s a contrast being made not between water and Spirit but Spirit and fire:

❖ **You’re either baptized by the Spirit or you get baptized with fire.**

Through the analogy of a harvest, the one baptized by the Spirit are portrayed as a good seed of grain being gathered into Christ’s barn. But as with the harvest, there is also the chaff, or straw, that would typically be gathered and burned. These days, chaff is what comes out of the back of the combine. The combine keeps the grain but throws out the chaff. When the end of the age comes, you either end up in the hopper or going through the chaff spreader. John says Christ will burn up the chaff in an eternal lake of fire. Those who don’t confess their sins and turn to Christ as their Savior will be the chaff... that’s a scary thought.

This is a serious message. But it's an honest message and it's a gift to you if you've never heard it before. I don't know how many will watch this online sermon. But if you're watching and you've never confessed your sin and accepted Christ as your Savior, what are you waiting for? Jesus Christ has an abundant life to offer you by the Spirit. It's not always the easy life but it is so much better than being a slave to sin. This passage says you're either baptized by the Spirit or baptized eternally by fire. You're either forgiven or not forgiven. You're either a new creation or you're not. Saved or unsaved. There's no middle ground. And one of things I think God wants to produce through this whole coronavirus pandemic to wake people up to that fact. To make people think about death and their eternal destination. Sin is a serious thing, more serious than coronavirus. But unlike coronavirus, **there's a remedy for sin and His name is Jesus Christ.** He is God and He became a man to die for your sins and for mine on the cross. And by believing in Him you can have eternal life.

One of the things I think we need to learn from John is that he didn't hide the remedy. He lived it and he preached it. That's what servants do.

❖ **Servants point people to Christ by living and proclaiming the gospel message.**

By the way we live and the way we speak, we're all sending a message to those around us. If ignore God and live as if God doesn't exist, we're saying I don't believe in a coming Savior and don't believe in wrath to come. But if we live and speak in such a way that the gospel is revealed in our life I think our lives will say what John said once: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" That's what I want my life to say. "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" Behold, there is One who is can forgive sin and through His Spirit create in us new life and new desires to live for Him. He is the One that John says I am not worthy to even untie His sandals to wash His feet. Not even worthy to perform the lowest known form of servitude too. Serving Christ by living it and proclaiming it is a privilege.

¹ Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44, 304-305.

² Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah From a Jewish Perspective, Vol. 1* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 2017), 467.

³ William Lane, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 50-51.