

## The Thoroughly Christocentric Forerunner (Mark 1:2-8)

Notes from a sermon preached by Pastor Matt Privett at Covenant Baptist Church

### Remembering the Purpose

Before focusing on verses 2-8 we've got to remember verse 1 because it is the thesis statement of this entire book. It reveals Mark's purpose for writing; namely, to show that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that is good news! In verse 2 Mark immediately sets forth proving his thesis.

Sometimes when we read sections of the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, it is tempting to see them as merely biographical accounts of assorted biblical characters. In our minds, whether we realize it or not, we are prone to divorce the individual stories from these individuals' contributions to the entire story of Scripture. Take this text, Mark 1:2-8, which tells us about John the Baptist.

In comparison with someone like David, or even Elijah, whom the baptizer is the New Testament emulation of, we know relatively little about this man named John. But all Scripture is breathed out by God. All Scripture is profitable for teaching. And no Scripture is written in isolation. No Scripture stands by itself, apart from the central purpose of God's Word, which is to reveal Himself, display His glory, and explain how His creation might be saved.

Mark 1:2-8 is in no way divorced from the thesis of Mark. It is, instead, Exhibit A in the evidence Mark presents as he explains to us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that is good news! By peering through Mark's lens on John the Baptist we discover more about our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

### The Mission of John the Baptist

Don't let it go unnoticed that the first sentence of the book, verse 1, the thesis statement, is immediately followed by the words, "As it is written." Mark uses less Old Testament Scripture than the other Gospel writers. Still, he begins by tying the thesis of his book to what has come before. He writes, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet," and then goes on to include a combination of statements from Isaiah and Malachi, with a little allusion to Exodus thrown in there.

It is as if, right at the beginning, Mark is making it clear that what he is writing, the story he is telling, the history he is recounting, is directly connected to the Old Testament. Jesus Christ is not a do-over on God's original plan. God did not give the Ten Commandments and then wring His hands in frustration while the nation of Israel kept breaking them over and over again. God did not set up salvation as living up to a set of rules and then change things in the New Testament.

The Old Testament is looking forward to the New Testament. The Law's purpose was to point the children of Israel to a complete dependence on God to provide for a righteousness they could never attain on their own. Israel was supposed to be looking for the One who will crush the serpent's head, the One who will reign on the throne of David forever. Mark very succinctly connects his Gospel to the Old Testament.

So what, then, is it that is written? "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.'"

The nation of Israel was to be looking for someone who would come to plow the road for the long awaited Messiah. They were looking for someone who, as Luke puts it, would come "in the spirit and power of Elijah." Just as Elijah was a prophet who declared the word of the Lord to Israel and proclaimed the one true God to them and their need to repent of their sins, so too this messenger would proclaim the Word made flesh, the Lamb of God, the Logos that John writes about.

John the Baptist is the one Isaiah says would clear the road, prepare the way for the Messiah, the Christ. These Old Testament quotations merely reference John the Baptist, the messenger, but take a closer look at them again. John the Baptist is not the subject of verses 2 and 3.

This is a word from the Lord and it is being delivered to the One for whom the way is to be prepared. This is God the Father talking to the Son. These verses tell us something about John the Baptist, but they are really about Jesus!

The mission of John Baptist was a thoroughly Christocentric mission. It was centered on Jesus. Notice the pronouns.

I send My messenger ahead of YOU, or literally, "Before YOUR face"!

Who will prepare YOUR way!

This voice in the wilderness would be crying:

Make ready the way of the LORD!

Make HIS paths straight!

John's focus was not on himself, but on Jesus. That is why the apostle John would record John the Baptist saying, "He (Jesus) must increase and I must decrease." A thoroughly Christocentric mission. But notice something more about these Old Testament citations Mark gives.

He says he's quoting Isaiah the prophet, but this first sentence actually comes from Malachi 3:1. Since Isaiah was a more "major" prophet in Israel that isn't out of the ordinary. But this quote from Malachi 3:1 is in turn a reference to another promise of God sending a messenger, an angel, in Exodus 23:20.

If you read through the book of Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, it sure looks like Israel has failed. The new exodus, the Israel that existed after the Babylonian captivity, had not lived up to the hope. But God was not through with Israel. His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob... His promises to David... would be fulfilled. So in Malachi 3:1 through verse 3, "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi closes, not with sorrow, but with hope. Yes, Israel has failed, but the word of God has not. His people for His own possession will be redeemed. And He's sending a messenger to prepare the way for the Lord who is coming. Mark's quotation of Malachi is good news. Then, Mark gets to the Isaiah quote, which is from Isaiah 40:3. Isaiah writes, "A voice is calling, 'Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.'"

The word "LORD" there in Isaiah is a reference to the covenant name of God, which He shared with Moses at the burning bush. You hear it pronounced "Yahweh." The LORD of whom Isaiah spoke was no mere earthly master, but God Himself. When Mark quotes this verse he's describing John the Baptist, but the prophet's proclamation is about Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the One Mark is clearing the way for. Jesus is the capital L small capital ORD. Mark is saying, in no uncertain terms, that Jesus is Yahweh! Jesus Christ is the Son of God and it's good news. This is a message of hope! Israel has failed but the Lord is coming!

So in the first three verses he is already going about proving his thesis. It was the mission of John the Baptist to prepare His way. His preaching in the wilderness, his ministry, was the appetizer for the main course to come.

### The Message of John the Baptist

John the Baptist seems to have had an acute sense of what was happening, who he was, and his role in pronouncing the arrival of the Christ. He didn't go to Jerusalem, but into the wilderness, identifying with the prophet Elijah. Knowing that he was God's Messiah Messenger, that's where he went to preach in order to fulfill Isaiah 40:3. He was the voice in the wilderness. That would be his place of business.

When he got there he began to preach a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness. To be baptized was to be fully immersed in water, but the baptism of John was not the same as the one instituted by the church. That much is clear from Acts 19, when Paul ran into some disciples of John who had been baptized but had not yet known of and believed in Jesus. When Paul proclaimed Jesus to them they believed, and so they were then baptized in the name of Jesus. So John's baptism is not the same thing as Christian baptism.

His was a specific baptism of repentance. John knew the kingdom of God was coming, so what was it these people needed to specifically repent of? What did they need to turn from? Well, in verse 5 we find that "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." While John hadn't seen fit to go to Jerusalem, the people in Jerusalem came to him!

And what did they need to repent of? What did they need to turn from? What did they need change their minds about? Well to gain some perspective on that, let's look at some of the other parts of the Gospels that deal with John the Baptist.

In Matthew 3 we read about how the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the religious and political leaders of the Jewish people, came to John to be baptized. He responded to them, "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 for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham."

John the Baptist was calling out the leaders of the Jews because they weren't trusting in God. They were trusting in their own Jewishness, the fact that they descended from Abraham, for their own salvation. They were not bearing fruit... they were not doing good works which would have shown that they had repented, turned from their sin.

Instead, they were trusting in their bloodline, their heritage, their tradition, and not in God, the One who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, out of exile in Babylon. They were trusting in their bloodline, but not in the One who was sending His Son to shed His own blood for them. They needed to repent of trusting in their Jewish blood to save them.

Luke's description of the event goes a little further. In Luke 3 he records the crowds asking John, after he said this, "Then what shall we do?" John said, "The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise." To the tax collectors he said, "Collect no more than what you have been ordered to." Because the Jewish tax collectors working for the Romans were notorious for cheating their own people. Soldiers questioned him. "What shall we do?" they asked. And John said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages."

All in all, John's baptism of repentance was a baptism of reform, for both individuals and for the nation of Israel, and because soldiers were included here, we see that the lesson is for the whole world. Don't trust in who you came from, where you came from, to save you.

But John's message was not one without hope. You see, John is what a lot of people would call a "fire and brimstone" preacher. He spoke of sin. He spoke of the need to repent. He spoke of judgment. But he also spoke of forgiveness.

John came preaching a baptism of repentance AND the forgiveness of sins. John proclaimed, and part of that proclamation was good news that forgiveness is available through the One who was to come. This was not baptism in the Holy Spirit, but a baptism of repentance looking forward to the Messiah, through whom forgiveness would be made available to all who trust in God. John was calling the people to renew the spirit of their covenant with God on Mount Sinai, when they pledged to Him that they would be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That was the message of John the Baptist. Repent! And so people did. One after another, many of the Jews came and confessed their sins and professed repentance, and John baptized them in the Jordan River.

### The Method of John the Baptist

All too often preaching the Bible is seen as something for yesterday, something that no longer applies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. There is an ongoing debate among Christians today as to what method we should use to proclaim the gospel, and many people unfortunately view Bible preaching as a relic of yesteryear.

John the Baptist was familiar with that criticism. He appeared in the wilderness as a relic of an era long since passed. Elijah the Tishbite, 1 Kings 1:8 says, wore a garment of hair and a leather belt around his waist; and John the Baptist appeared clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. John did not dress and eat like the refined Jews that hovered around the temple in Jerusalem. He was not one of the religious elites and didn't aspire to be.

But John's dress and diet were not the only things that resembled Elijah. He also had a propensity for confronting ungodly authority. Elijah had found himself in a lot of trouble when he confronted the wicked King Ahab. John would eventually be imprisoned and later beheaded when he spoke out against the sexual immorality of King Herod Antipas, who had married his brother's wife.

And so just as Elijah renewed God's covenant with Israel on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18, John's preaching resembled that in the wilderness. He did not market himself smartly. He did not advertise. He did not ease up on his message or lighten the urgency with which he proclaimed truth and the necessity of repenting from sin. John's method was no frills. John's method was in the extreme. But John's method was also absolutely obedient to the will of God.

He didn't come to make John the Baptist famous. He came to make Jesus famous. He came to prepare the way for the Messiah. John the Baptist's method was to point to way to Jesus Christ, and he knew his own place before the King of Kings. The fiery preacher who gained popularity with masses coming from Jerusalem, including the religious and political elite, didn't let it go to his head, but took the spotlight that was on him and shone it on the One coming who was mightier than he, the One he was not fit to stoop down in front of to untie the thongs of His sandals.

John knew, despite his standing in the eyes of these people who flocked to be baptized by him, that Jesus Christ was infinitely greater. The loosing of sandals and washing of feet were duties reserved to slaves. In fact, the Jews viewed those duties as so low that usually only Gentile slaves did them, and they thought of Gentiles as dogs. John knew that he was like these Jews he was baptizing, a sinner, and wasn't even worthy to be a slave dog to the Messiah.

It's interesting that John's attitude mimics the attitude Jesus would take in the upper room, when He washed the feet of His disciples. The bottom line is that John exhibited Christ-like humility when speaking about Christ Himself. He knew that he must decrease and Christ must increase. John knew that his baptism was symbolic of a more permanent and powerful reality, a more permanent and powerful baptism to come. "I baptize you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

That is an extraordinary thing to say, because as James Edwards puts it, "in the Old Testament the bestowal of the Spirit belongs exclusively to God. John's declaration, according to Mark, transfers the bestowal of the Spirit to *Jesus*, once again indicating that, as the Greater One, Jesus will come in the power and at the prerogative of God." In other words, when Jesus baptizes you with the Holy Spirit He is doing something that only God can do. Doing something only God can do. Mark is showing his readers, beloved, you and I, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. John the Baptist's method was a no frills, flat out, declaration of that truth, pointing to Jesus as if to say, "He's the One."

## Conclusion

It was Jesus Himself who, in Matthew 11:11, said that there is no man who has been born of a woman who is greater than John the Baptist. What a testimony from the Lord Himself as to the godly character of this man. And what a model for us to follow!

John the Baptist was not about his own laurels. His mission was centered on Christ and carried out. His message and clear and delivered. His method was simple and pointed. His life and his entire ministry were all about proclaiming the word of the Lord and preparing the way for Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist was set apart from before he was even conceived to usher in the ministry of Jesus Christ. And so, if you and I are to follow his example we must look past him and to the One he was pointing to. The thoroughly Christocentric mission of John the Baptist is a one of hope and proof of the good news that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Through the lens of John the Baptist, we see the One who is mightier. That One is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Second Person of the Eternal Trinity. God, demanding perfect righteousness and obedience from every man, knows that there is none righteous, not even one. Therefore, God sent His only begotten Son into world to fulfill His righteousness demands, then go to the cross to bear the full fury of His wrath against all sin, for all time, for all who will ever believe. The result for those who do not believe is the wrath to come, of which John the Baptist preached and even warned the Pharisees and Sadducees. But for those who believe, it is the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

If you have come to Jesus on the basis of faith and nothing more, then we can look at the ministry of John the Baptist as something to follow. Our mission, our lives, must be centered on Christ. Every facet of our being must be on a trajectory to the cross. Every part of our lives - every attitude, every thought, every action, every word - must be lived out with the purpose of glorifying Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We, beloved, must be Christocentric. Christ-centered.

Can it be said of you today that you are Christocentric? Would an impartial observer use that kind of language to describe your life? Our message, the gospel, must be clear and delivered. We've got to be clear on what the gospel is and proclaim it. And our method must be simple and pointed. We don't need tricks and gimmicks to fulfill our mission. We need the truth and we need to trust that God is sovereign and to be obeyed.

John the Baptist understood that. Let us emulate his humility. Let us emulate his faithfulness.

He was set apart before birth to prepare the way for the first coming of Jesus Christ. In emulating his thoroughly Christocentric life, may we who have also been set apart before the foundation of the world to be saved by the grace of God prepare the way for Christ's Second Coming.