

Prepare the Way

Mark 1:1-8

Are you ready? Are you really ready?

In our scripture today Mark records the testimonies of several dependable witnesses to assure us that Jesus is all that He claims to be. The first was John Mark himself. He stated boldly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary; and their home was a meeting place for believers in the city (Acts 12:1–19). Several scholars believe that Mark was the young man described in Mark 14:51–52. Since Peter called Mark “my son” (1 Peter 5:13), it is probable that it was Peter who led Mark to faith in Jesus Christ. Church tradition states that Mark was “Peter’s interpreter,” so that the Gospel of Mark reflects the personal experiences and witness of Simon Peter.

Mark wrote of the “joyful news about” Jesus Christ, that God’s Son has come into the world and died for our sins. It is the Good News that our sins can be forgiven, that we can belong to the family of God and one day go to live with God. It is the announcement of victory over sin, death, and hell (1 Cor. 15:1–8, 51–52; Gal. 1:1–9).

The second group of witnesses that prepared the way for Jesus coming was the Old Testament prophets. Mark quoted from Malachi (Malachi 3:1), Isaiah (Isaiah 40:3) and Exodus (Ex. 23:20). Mark starts the story of Jesus a long way back. It did not begin with Jesus’ birth; but long, long ago in the mind of God.

Mark explained that the messenger and voice from these passages refer to John the Baptist, the prophet God sent to prepare the way for His Son (Matt. 3; Luke 3:1–18; John 1:19–34). In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. This included both repairing the roads and preparing the people. By calling the nation to repentance, John the

Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah and Malachi join voices in declaring that Jesus Christ is the Lord, Yahweh God.

The third witness is John the Baptist, one whom Jesus called the greatest of the prophets (Matt. 11:1–15). In his dress, manner of life, and message of repentance, John identified with the Old Testament prophet Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mal. 4:5; Matt. 17:10–13; and note Luke 1:13–17). The “wilderness” where John ministered is the rugged wasteland along the western shore of the Dead Sea. John was telling the people symbolically that they were in a “spiritual wilderness” far worse than the physical wilderness which their ancestors had endured for forty years. John called the people to leave their spiritual wilderness, trust their “Joshua,” “Yahweh is salvation,” or by the name we know, Jesus, and enter into their inheritance.

John was careful to magnify Jesus and not himself (see John 3:25–30). John baptized repentant sinners in water, but said “the coming One” would baptize them with the Spirit (Acts 1:4–5). John’s message and baptism were preparation so that the people would be ready to meet and trust the Messiah, Jesus Christ.¹

John’s baptism was not an innovation since Jews required Gentiles wanting to be admitted into Judaism to be baptized by self-immersion. The startling new element was that John’s baptism was designed for God’s covenant people, the Jews, and it required their repentance in view of the coming Messiah (cf. Matt. 3:2).

This baptism is described as one relating to or expressive of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. “Repentance” means “a turn about, a deliberate change of mind resulting in a change of direction in thought and behavior” (compare Matt. 3:8; 1 Thes. 1:9).

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Mk 1:1

“Forgiveness” means “the removal or cancellation of an obligation or barrier of guilt.” It refers to God’s gracious act whereby “sins” as a debt are canceled, based on Christ’s sacrificial death (cf. Matt. 26:28).

It is clear that the ministry of John was mightily effective in preparing the way. Mark showed the great impact John made on all areas of Judea and Jerusalem. The people went out and were baptized by John in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins to God. It was like in movie with a continual procession of people who kept going out to hear John’s preaching and to be baptized by him. Being baptized by John in the Jordan marked the “turn” of a Jew to God. It identified him or her with the repentant people who were preparing for the coming Messiah. Included in the performance of the baptismal rite was the people’s open confession of sins. They openly agreed with God’s verdict on their sins because they had “failed to hit the mark or live up to God’s standard. Every Jew familiar with the nation’s history knew they had fallen short of God’s demands. Their willingness to be baptized by John in the desert was an admission of their disobedience and an expression of their turning to God.

John emphasized the importance of the Coming One and showed his own humility (John 3:27-30) by declaring that he was not worthy to stoop down and untie the thongs or leather straps used to fasten His sandals. Even a Hebrew slave was not required to do this menial task for his master! John said he baptized with “water” but those who received it pledged to welcome the Coming One who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:5; 11:15-16). Isaiah, Ezekiel and Joel had prophesized that the bestowal of the Spirit would come with the Messiah (Isa. 44:3; Ezek. 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29).²

²Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:102

But what does this prepare the way thing have to do with us. We live over two thousand years since his initial coming, and we don't see any signs of his return! The fact is we don't know when he will return, but we must live each day in anticipation. We must live as if he will come today, but if not today, we must prepare for those that come behind us! The poet said:

“In youth, because I could not be a singer,
I did not even try to write a song;
I set no little trees along the roadside,
Because I knew their growth would take so long.
But now from wisdom that the years have brought me,
I know that it may be a blessed thing
To plant a tree for someone else to water,
Or make a song for someone else to sing.”

We may never see the time come, but we must labor for those who follow. John never saw the fulfillments of God's promised or the results of Jesus' work on earth, but he prepared the way for others!

Do you know that wherever Christianity comes it brings purification and prepares the people for the coming of the Savior.

A journalist named Bruce Barton tells of his first important assignment to write a series of articles designed to expose Billy Sunday, the evangelist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Three towns were chosen. He said “I talked to the merchants and they told me that during the meetings and afterward people walked up to the counter and paid bills which were so old that they had long since been written off the books.” He went to visit the president of the chamber of commerce of a town that Billy Sunday had visited three years before. “I am not a member of any church,” he said. “I never attend but I'll tell you one thing. If it was proposed now to bring Billy Sunday to this town, and if we knew as much about the results of his work in advance as we do now, and if the churches would not raise the necessary funds to bring him, I could raise the money in half a day from men who

never go to church. He took eleven thousand dollars out of here, but a circus comes here and takes out that amount in one day and leaves nothing. He left a different moral atmosphere.” The exposure that Bruce Barton meant to write became a tribute to the cleansing power of the Christian message.

When Billy Graham preached in Shreveport, Louisiana, liquor sales dropped by 40 per cent. and the sale of Bibles increased 300 per cent. During a mission in Seattle, it is said that “several impending divorce actions were cancelled.” In Greensboro, North Carolina, the report was that “the entire social structure of the city was affected.”

One of the great stories of what Christianity can do came out of the mutiny on the *Bounty*. The mutineers were put ashore on Pitcairn Island. There were nine mutineers, six native men, ten native women and a girl, fifteen years old. One of them succeeded in making crude alcohol. A terrible situation ensued. They all died except Alexander Smith. Smith found a Bible. He read it and he made up his mind to build up a state with the natives of that island based directly on the Bible. It was twenty years before an American sloop called at the island. They found a completely Christian community. There was no jail because there was no crime. There was no hospital because there was no disease. There was no asylum because there was no insanity. There was no illiteracy; and nowhere in the world was human life and property so safe. Christianity had cleansed that society.

However in order for us to prepare the way for Christ to come into our lives and the lives of our families, and into the lives of our community, and into the lives of our country, and into the lives of our world, we must be willing to confess our sins and become new people. This confession has three parts.

First a person must make confession to themselves. It is a part of human nature that we shut our eyes to what we do not wish to see, and above all to our own sins.

There is no one in the entire world harder to face than ourselves; and the first step to repentance and to a right relationship to God is to admit our sin to ourselves.

Second a person must make confession to those whom they have wronged. It will not be much use saying to God that we are sorry until we say we are sorry to those whom we have hurt and grieved. The human barriers have to be removed before the divine barriers can go. We must humble ourselves and ask for forgiveness.

Third a person must make confession to God. The end of pride is the beginning of forgiveness. It is when a person says, "I have sinned," that God gets the chance to say, "I forgive."

We need to be like John and prepare the way for Christ. He did not seek center stage, but connected men and women to the one who was greater and stronger than he; and people listened to him because he pointed, not to himself, but to the one whom we all need.³ How will you prepare His way? How will you be ready?

³ Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Mark*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 9