Preparing the Messiah

Mark 1: 9-13

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Covenant people of God, we saw last time in the sermon on Mark 1 vs 1-8 how after centuries of preparation for the coming of the Messiah, centuries of preparation on God’s part, though of course He could have done things in an instant, but He chose to do it gradually over many centuries, finally, John the Baptist was sent in order to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. To prepare Israel, especially, for the coming of the Messiah. And John did that, he primed up Israel, by announcing that the day of that coming was upon them and that they should therefore repent of their sins and they should be baptised as a sign of cleansing. Or, face the wrath of God if they would not repent.

But you see it is not only the way that needed to be prepared, it’s not only Israel that needed to be prepared, and their sense of anticipation built up, and their awareness of their need for the Lord Jesus, all of that needed to be done, but the Messiah also Himself needed to be prepared.

And He needed that preparation not because He was God, God needs no preparation for anything, but he needed that preparation because He was also man. As a human child, He needed to grow up and to grow in knowledge and wisdom, He needed to be taught the scriptures from as soon as He could understand those things, and to grow in that understanding as a result. He needed to experience life, and to learn as a man to apply those scriptures. All of that He did without sin, but as a man, He needed to learn and grow in certain ways. And now as He is around about the age of 30, at this time give or take a little bit, at that time, the Lord Jesus is about to begin His ministry and now we find that there are some more things that needed to be in place for that ministry to start. Some more preparations that needed to be made. Firstly there is the preparation of His baptism. Secondly there is the preparation of God’s approval. And thirdly, there is the preparation of His testing.

These are our three points: Preparation of Baptism, God’s Approval and of Testing.

In the first place, I just want to remind you again of a couple of things we have already seen about John’s baptism – what was meant by that baptism that many people came to receive from John in the river Jordan. John’s baptism, as I’ve already indicated a little bit, represented the need, it spoke of the need for repentance on the part of the people, and it also gave them a warning, a warning of judgement and everything about John reinforced that point – he went out into the wilderness – a place that spoke of judgement as well. There was also John’s clothing that spoke of the wilderness and his diet even spoke of the wilderness and all of these things implied that there was a great sin on the part of God’s people Israel. And it was sin that needed to be dealt with. And that is the very reason why John’s baptism is called specifically a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. That’s what it’s called in Mark 1:4, but also in Matthew 3:11 and Luke 3:3. It is emphasised – it’s a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Why then did Jesus come to John in order to be baptised? And somebody in the congregation has actually asked me that question one time. Why did Jesus need to be baptised if Jesus is and was the perfect, sinless Son of God, why did He need a baptism for repentance for the forgiveness of sins – He had no sins? And that very question that someone in the congregation here asked me, was a question that John the Baptist asked himself. It confused him as well. To the point that he even tried to prevent Jesus from being baptised as we read in Matthew 3:14. And John says – You ask me to baptise You – I am the one who needs to be baptised BY You. The problem was that John the Baptist saw Jesus – he was looking at Jesus simply as an individual in His own right, and not seeing Him in relation to His people.

He was looking at Jesus as the One who was so mighty and perfect that John wasn’t even fit to take off Jesus’ sandals to wash His feet in the Jordan, let alone to baptise Him in the Jordan. Here in Mark’s gospel we don’t get an explanation for that, but we do get an explanation in two of the other gospels – in Matthew 3:15 and also to some extent in John’s gospel. In Matthew 3:15 Jesus explains to John – He says permit it (the baptism in other words) permit it at this time. Allow this as a kind of one off exceptional situation – permit it at this time for in this way it is fitting for us – for you and Me John – for us to fulfil all righteousness. Now you couple that with what John the Baptist is recorded as saying in John 1:29 when he sees Jesus coming towards him and he says “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”. You put those two things together. Jesus and John had to fulfil all righteousness by John baptising Jesus because Jesus’ ministry was to take away the sins of the world. And He did that – He took away the sins of the world - by identifying with His sinful people and by being their substitute. The baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins was not because Jesus needed to be cleansed from His own sins, but because He represented people who are sinners. And who did need to be cleansed and forgiven. And that is what makes this so relevant at this particular time, and so important at this particular time, Jesus says to John – allow it at this time. He draws attention to that because Jesus is reaffirming His commitment to carry out His Messianic calling at the very start of His public ministry – at that particular time. He’s sending out this signal just before He begins His ministry. For that reason, the baptism of the Lord Jesus points to the cross. His clear commitment here to represent His people and to take away their sins – that’s going to lead Him from Jordan to Calvary. That also helps us understand the relationship between John’s baptism of the people, John’s baptism of Jesus and our baptism today. John gave a baptism that involved water. And John could call on the people to repent of their sins and be cleansed and to have that symbol of cleansing applied to them in the Jordan River. He could do that – but John was not able to change the hearts of the people which was essential for all of this to take its full meaning. John couldn’t change their hearts – he could just put water on them. Much more was needed than what John gave. And you see Jesus agreed to be baptised by John to show that He was committed to doing that more that was needed to taking that upon Himself. To bring that change of heart that was especially going to be needed along with the effective removal of sins on the cross. After the cross, the Lord Jesus, after the resurrection, He sent His spirit, precisely for this reason, to give that new heart that was needed that John the Baptist couldn’t supply. The spirit who was poured out at Pentecost bringing regeneration and enabling sinners to respond in faith. That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit that is referred to in Mark 1:9. And it is that which gives the cleansing through His blood by being joined by faith with a new heart to the Lord Jesus, receiving His benefits, so that the blood of Jesus cleanses our hearts, that is what is signified and sealed in our baptisms today. A baptism that first needed the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. What we celebrate, the sacrament of baptism needed first the death and resurrection of Christ. Unlike the baptism in the Jordan, the baptism of Jesus that looked forward to the death and resurrection of Christ. To sum up this first point – we can put it this way – the first thing that was needed for Jesus as man to be prepared for His mission He needed to make His mission statement. You know that’s very popular today. Businesses, institutions (including Christian institutions) like to draw up a mission statement. This is Jesus’ mission statement. We have it here with His baptism. A statement of substitution for sinners aimed at their true and effective cleansing.

Second thing that was needed for his preparation before this ministry could commence is God’s explicit approval. Our second point.

What was needed was the Fathers’ public acceptance of Jesus’ mission statement, of His son’s willingness, and His suitability to carry it out. Two aspects are shown here in the giving of that approval. The first is the coming down of the Holy Spirit, and the second is the voice of God from heaven. As to the Holy Spirit coming down, Mark says that immediately when Jesus came up out of the Jordan River, He saw the heavens opening, or you could translate it, the heavens rent or split apart, and he saw the spirit coming down like a dove, descending on Him V10, or lighting on Him as Matthew 3:16 says. We don’t know for sure whether the Holy Spirit took the actual form of a dove or whether it was some other physical appearance that simply looked a bit like a dove landing on something – you could translate or understand it either way that the spirit actually took on the form of a dove or looked like a bird or dove for example landing on something. Though we do know from Luke 3:22 that it was definitely some kind of physical, bodily form that the spirit took on at this point.

There have been a number of suggestions as to why a dove – what the significance of that is. The best of those are the connection to Gen 1:2 where the spirit of God is shown to be hovering over the waters in the first creation, implying that what Jesus is embarking on is a new creation. A new creation of humanity that will be saved by Him. Or the other reference that is often made is to Gen 8:8ff, that the dove was the bird sent out to indicate a new start after the raging waters of the flood – God’s judgement on a wicked world after that had subsided.

But aside from that question of why the dove, there is something that is even more important about this and that is that the Holy Spirit descended on Him. However you understand the dove, the Spirit descended on Him. In the Old Testament anointing oil was applied when prophets, priests and kings entered into their office. It was poured upon them at their inauguration. And it symbolised their need for the Holy Spirit as a gift to gift them and to equip them and fill them for carrying our their office properly. Here, at the inauguration of the great prophet, priest and king – the Lord Jesus – as He is being prepared in His human nature for His Messianic office, here He too is anointed with the Holy Spirit. And Psalm 45:7 prophesied that the Messiah would be anointed and Is. 11:2 and 61:1ff prophesied that the spirit would be bestowed on the Messiah at His anointing and that is exactly what happens here.

Now this is something that is probably not emphasised enough today, this truth, in preaching today and in writing, you don’t read a huge amount about it. That is the fullness of the Spirit in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ and the importance of that. But if you have a look through the New Testament on the relationship between the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit, you get an idea of just how important a thing this was. You find as you read through the New Testament that when Jesus preached, He preached the good news in the Spirit – Luke 4:18. When the Lord Jesus did miracles with great power, He did it in the Spirit – Matthew 12:28, Acts 10:38. Moreover the New Testament tells us that those who reject the Lord Jesus Christ in a final way are in fact blaspheming against the Holy Spirit – and that’s in Mark 3:29. Later when the Lord Jesus Christ left this world He promised that He would send the Holy Spirit to continue His work and to bring the baptism of the Holy Spirit – John 14:16-17 for example.

You put all of this together and you see just how essential this was, not only to show God’s approval, but also to equip the Lord Jesus in His human nature for His Messianic work.

The other indication of approval here is the voice from heaven. “You are my beloved Son, in You I am well pleased” – v11. And literally there the original language describes the Lord Jesus, God describes His Son as “the Son of Me, the Beloved”. Of course every believer is an adopted son of God, and in the Old Testament - the kings especially, the sons of David who were anointed as kings, were said to be sons of God in a special way. Jehovahs Witnesses will tell you this when they knock at your door, and you try and point out verses to them and you say look Jesus is called the Son of God, and they will say yes, but so were the kings in the Old Testament, so what’s the big deal – doesn’t mean He’s divine. But here, this is distinguished from all of that because Jesus Christ is said to be THE Son, THE Beloved. Absolutely unique – there is no other Son and there is no other Beloved like Him. This too was prophesied in the Old Testament. Is. 42:1. And of course, this kind of language is repeated – this approval of God at the Mount of Transfiguration – Mark 9:7. There is another reference there in this verse to Psalm 2:7, if you’ve got marginal notes you will see these kind of references where God says of the Messiah – when He would take up His office, you are my Son, today I have begotten You. Another indication of Jesus’ special relationship.

Actually you can translate V11, You are My beloved Son, in You I WAS well pleased, not I AM, but I WAS well pleased. Using a tense that implies a once- off thing. And that suggests that God was well pleased to decree these things before time even began. The Son of God was elected by God for His office and task. Certainly there is no reason to think, there are those people who say the Lord Jesus was not born God, He was not God when He was born. He was just a man. But later on at a certain point, when He was around 30 when He got baptised in the Jordan, the Spirit descended on Him and filled Him and then He became God. He was adopted as God at that point. That is an error referred to as Adoptionism – that Jesus was adopted into the Godhead. But there is no reason to think that here, because it doesn’t say that God starts being well pleased with His Son, just when the Spirit comes down – He says “I WAS well pleased before time even began”. And this gives us great confidence to know all of this – everything that’s happening from the start of Jesus’ ministry on – all of this is according to God’s eternal plan. Jesus decision to save the world wasn’t some last minute, spur of the moment thing. It was begun, it was carried on, and it was completed with the full involvement of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are all very active in this inauguration of Christ according to an eternal plan.

Well, with the baptism done, the Spirit descended, divine approval exclaimed from heaven – only one more preparation needed. That is the testing of Jesus’ integrity and His resolve. Our third and final point – the Preparation of Testing.

Note how immediately after the completion of these other matters, immediately the Spirit impels Jesus to go deeper into the wilderness. V12. And the language means He drives Him there. A very strong word. The Spirit DRIVES Jesus deeper into the wilderness. And that language indicates a sense of urgency. Though we shouldn’t think that the Spirit is forcing Jesus to do something He doesn’t want to do – it is with the full agreement of the Lord Jesus as well. And this is very similar to what we find for example in the book of Judges where Israel needs saving – they urgently need saving. And God causes His spirit to fall upon the judges and we read that the judges get up and they go out and they straight away do battle with God’s enemies – the Philistines – or they go out and they judge Israel, as for example we read in Judges 3:10.

Now as you may recall, I have already mentioned it a couple of times this morning again, the wilderness has a twofold significance. It implies judgement when God reduces fertile places to deserts because the people there have sinned against Him, but also it speaks of salvation. It reminds of God’s leading of His people Israel, through the wilderness to the Promised Land. But the leading of Israel to the Promised Land also involved a time of testing. In fact, it involved 40 years of testing. Which, as we find for example in Psalm 95:10, was 40 years that didn’t reflect very well on Israel, they didn’t exactly come through that testing with flying colours. Similarly, we find that Moses was 40 days up on Mount Sinai, and that Elijah was 40 days being fed and supplied with drink in the wilderness, and it has been suggested that this number 40 indicates a very thorough time of testing or proving or preparing – for all of these cases. So as Jesus prepares to lead the new Israel to a better promised land – He too is tested on our behalf for 40 days in the wilderness. And this is part of His humiliation because the wilderness, for Him here too, is a place of temptation – it’s a place of confrontation with the devil, of opposition. It’s a place of deprivation – He’s deprived of food. He’s deprived of comfort in the desert. It’s a place of danger – there are wild animals around Him. And that’s because it is also an answer to Adam’s failure in his testing. Because the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ, He not only has to pass the test that Adam failed, Adam had this test – will you trust and obey the word of God or not – Adam failed.

The Lord Jesus not only has to have a similar test – will You trust and obey the Word of God or not – but in addition to that, He has to undo the damage that has been caused by Adam’s failure. And that is why He takes His test from a position of humiliation. In the wilderness with all of these dangers and loss of comfort and so on, unlike Adam who was tested in a situation of perfect luxury – with all the food and drink around him that he could want. All of the comfort of a perfect paradise and still he failed. Whereas Jesus has the opposite – all the things that speak of misery and humiliation – and undergoes a similar test – but certainly not from the position of paradise.

And this is what He agreed to in His baptism. That He would identify with His people and be a substitute. And suffer that humiliation as a result and be tested in the midst of it. Now His resolve is being tested under the extremes of the wilderness with all of these things taken away and replaced with danger. But of course, this is only the beginning. Luke 4:13 says that after the Lord Jesus resisted the wilderness temptation (and we won’t go into the details of those temptations because Mark doesn’t) but after He finished that, the devil left Him until an opportune time. The devil didn’t give up. He didn’t go away and say I’m not going to tempt Jesus anymore, I’m not going to oppress Him, or be hostile to Him or attack Him in any way anymore – he left until an opportune time. Jesus had to go through His whole ministry like this. In the midst of misery and humiliation and under constant attack from the devil. And of course the greatest attack, and the greatest test would come later on the cross. Though He would also continue to have help – the help of the Holy Spirit and also according to the need of ministering angels as we read here too.

How are we to view all of this. Well, certainly not as an example of something we can go away and imitate. This is not one of those passages that is telling us, you have to go and do likewise – not exactly. After all, we cannot have our inauguration in three offices like Jesus did – Yes, we are prophets, priests and kings in Him – but we certainly aren’t the great prophet, priest and king. We cannot be baptised as He was with the same significance – taking on the sins of the world and identifying with sinners like that. We cannot expect that when we enter into our service and our ministry, whatever it may be, that the heavens are going to open for us and the spirit is going to come down in the form of a dove as it did for Jesus, or a voice from heaven exclaiming about us. And we cannot expect to do battle with the devil in a way that would be part of the redemption of other sinners. However, we can be baptised in the way that He is given to us because Jesus did all these things. Otherwise, those of us here who are baptised would not have been able to be baptised with the significance that that has. And we can also be baptised with the Holy Spirit, born again and enabled to respond in faith because the Lord Jesus did all these things. And we can trust and obey with God’s help and carry out our three-fold office as prophets, priests and kings because Jesus did all of these things rather than giving in to Satan. The Lord Jesus proving in the wilderness showing such perfect and great strength and resistance, that is what enables us in our situation, to make such a small start, that we do, it’s only a small start, yet we can make a small start by God’s grace, in resisting the devil despite our great weakness and failure. Only thus, is our Christian life in any aspect of it at all, it’s only possible because Jesus did these things from the start. Not just on the cross, but from the start. And we see also how far He was prepared to go, to enable this. And we can learn from that too. A baptism that speaks of identification with sinners. Knowing that that would lead to the cross. A testing in the wilderness that implied that He would have to fight the devil all the way to the cross. Even to the point of experiencing hell – enduring so much humiliation and oppression on our behalf. How far He was prepared to go – ON OUR BEHALF. But we also see how much the Father gave Him to enable all of this. His approval, His Spirit, ministering angels, so that we also could receive His approval, His Spirit and even the help of angels who do work in the background with God’s church.

In the preparation of the Messiah, then, it is here that we find also, as we do throughout His ministry, and on the cross of course, that here also, we have a guarantee of the victory of the Messiah. And in Him, we also have our assurance of our victory over satan, sin and death.

AMEN