Preparing the Way

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Is 40:1-5

Mark 1:1-8

Covenant people of God, as we begin this series on the Gospel according to Mark, it’s important to note that Mark himself tells us the theme of this book by way of a kind of title, and we find that title in V1, the title for the whole book – “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God”. Now usually we think of the gospels as being the gospel of Matthew, or the gospel of Mark, or the gospel of Luke or the gospel of John, but according to Mark it’s not his gospel, or the gospel of any other mere man. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ – in other words, it is from, it is for and it is about Jesus Christ, and that is why I prayed also a moment ago that we walk away from here focused on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is His gospel we hear. This gospel has a beginning, we are told. And that is an interesting choice of words. When is this beginning – the beginning of the gospel? Any why does Mark consider himself to be writing only a beginning, why not tell us the whole gospel? We look at these questions under two headings this morning. First of all – the beginning of the Gospel and secondly – the Messenger Preparing for the Gospel. The Gospels’ beginning and Its Messenger Who Prepares.

In the first place, when would you say that the gospel begins. Many would say it begins with the incarnation or the birth of Jesus Christ. And of course, some celebrate that event this week, on December 25. It is interesting to note though, that Mark doesn’t even mention the incarnation in his gospel. Even though he is dealing with this very subject, the beginning of the gospel, he doesn’t mention that. And John, in his gospel, is very similar. The gospel of John has just one verse on the incarnation and that is John 1:14. And this is not to say that the incarnation or birth of Christ is unimportant. Not at all. The gospels of Matthew and Luke have a huge amount of material on that – showing that it is important. But Mark is more interested in showing how the beginning of the gospel comes, in fact, well before the birth of Jesus Christ, and Mark is also interested in telling us what the incarnation of Christ was for – it was for the ministry that followed; it was for the death of the Lord Jesus Christ that followed; for the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ that followed, in order to bring salvation, the good news for sinners.

And that is why he jumps from John the Baptist straight to the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ without mentioning the Saviour’s birth in detail. And in a way we express something similar when we talk about the Lord Jesus being ‘born to die’. Or when we read or talk about the Lord Jesus being ‘born to save’ – as Matthew expresses it as we read from Matthew 1. And when we put it that way we are being reminded that the birth, the incarnation of the Lord Jesus Christ is part of a whole work of salvation; a coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into this world that involved a whole lot of things to do with our salvation – not only the birth, but also His ministry, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the sitting of the Lord Jesus Christ at the right hand of God, and His final coming – all of that part of one great coming in which no single event can be isolated – they are all part of this saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now the beginning of all of that goes back even further than John the Baptist. It goes back to the Old Testament. That’s why, as he explains the beginning of this, Mark quotes from the Old Testament. He quotes from the book of Isaiah, especially, in reference to John the Baptist. We can go back even further than Isaiah, if we wanted to – we could go back to Genesis 3:15. What is sometimes called the proto-evangel – meaning the first appearance of the gospel in the scriptures, a verse that talks about the seed of the woman, the Lord Jesus Christ, eventually coming to defeat the seed of the serpent. The work of the devil. Or we could go to many other passages In the Old Testament, many other foreshadowings of the coming of Christ; many other prophesies of the coming of Christ, giving us details about where He would be born in Bethlehem, giving us details about the virgin birth and such things. We could turn to those, but here in Mark it is especially to the book of Isaiah that he turns. For in Isaiah we have especially the use of the term “good news” gospel. That term is used in Isaiah some seven times, meaning the good news of a future salvation that was to come to God’s people, a salvation that would come to the poor and afflicted, who in their extreme conditions, would realise that they had nowhere else to turn, they weren’t going to be helped by men, they would turn therefore, to the living God and find their deliverance in Him. And this is so strong a theme in the book of Isaiah, so often does this message of comfort of salvation to come, the good news to come, so often is this highlighted that many even refer to a fifth gospel in the scriptures, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Isaiah. And they talk about the gospel according to Isaiah. Isaiah also mentions the bearers of the gospel – the ones who would help to bring it. But just who that bearer is varies from chapter to chapter. In Isaiah sometimes he speaks of the church, Zion bearing that good news, sometimes he speaks of the Messiah bearing that good news, sometimes he even speaks of foreigners, gentiles, bearing that good news and sometimes it is unspecified. But Mark refers to Isaiah to show that one of the bearers was to be John the Baptist. Thus we may also see the beginning of the gospel in the ministry of John the Baptist. That’s how Mark sees it from the Old Testament – the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God, as it is written in Isaiah concerning this messenger who was to precede the Messiah’s coming – John the Baptist.

John’s role tends to be under-rated today. But it is not under-rated by Mark, it is not under-rated by Matthew or by Luke or by John, or by Isaiah, Matthew’s gospel has one chapter on John’s preparatory ministry. Mark has half a chapter on it and starts his gospel with this subject; Luke has most of an extremely long chapter on the birth of John and another extremely long one on his ministry, and John, like Mark, has more on John the Baptist’s testimony than he does on the birth of Jesus. And there are other references in the gospels in addition to that, such as Matthew 11:11 where the Lord Jesus explains that in all of those who had been born up to that point – up to the time of John the Baptist, there is not a single man born of woman who is greater. So there is no doubt that the gospels and the scripture as a whole, value the ministry of John the Baptist extremely highly. Now you add to that the fact that Israel had had the voice of prophecy silenced for approximately 300 years at the time when John the Baptist comes on the scene.

Suddenly his prophetic voice is heard, crying in the wilderness thereby fulfilling Old Testament prophecy in its own right. The appearance of this prophet was a very significant event to the Jews. To use an illustration, it would be as if you had been marooned on a desert island, and you had a radio, and the radio wasn’t working and you tried and you tried, year upon year you tried to get that radio to work. You tried to get some sign from the outside world, some message, or perhaps to be able to send a message. You tried for year upon year, and nothing happened and then suddenly one day it comes through loud and clear. Imagine the excitement. Imagine the excitement for God’s people in Israel, 300 years of radio silence and then suddenly the voice crying in the wilderness. And the Jews show that they know that this is so by flocking to hear Him, and to be baptised by this Man. People flocked from Jerusalem, from all over Judea, because they understood the importance of this.

We also must be careful not to under-estimate the significance and the message of John the Baptist today. But of course, however importantly we see John the Baptist, this significance of the Lord Jesus Christ towers over all of that, when it comes to the beginning of the gospel, as well as its carrying through and completion.

Already Isaiah 61:1 prophesied that the Spirit of the Lord God would rest upon Him, upon the Lord Jesus, that God anointed Him for this purpose, in other words, God made Him Messiah – the anointed one – in order to bring the good news of the gospel to the afflicted. And Matthew 4:23 takes this Old Testament prophecy up by stating that Jesus went everywhere proclaiming the good news – the gospel of the kingdom to those who were afflicted. And as He went He dealt with their afflictions also, healing them as well as preaching. It is, after all, His gospel. And again, John the Baptist is very important, but the Lord Jesus towers over all of that because it is not John the Baptist’s gospel, it is not Mark’s gospel at the end of the day, it is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That shows His pre-eminence. Mark doesn’t introduce the beginning of the gospel in Christ by describing the birth of Christ. But he does imply it in verse 7, where he refers to the Messiah as the coming one. (I’ll say a little bit more about that later). The Messiah as the coming one who comes into the world after John the Baptist.

This raises another question – since Mark goes straight from John the Baptist into the ministry of Christ, His death and resurrection, why not title his book – the beginning and the end of the gospel? Isn’t Mark saying more in his book that just the beginning of the gospel? Well yes, but the effect of the Lord Jesus’ work, the effect of the gospel did not end with the last verse in Mark. Mark 16:20. Mark chapter 16 ends with a brief mention of Christ’s ascension and His sitting at the Father’s right hand, but we know that other things happened after that – other important things. The Lord Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit at Pentecost pouring Him out upon all His people from the greatest to the least. And the Lord Jesus is still to come again at the second coming and bringing the final judgement. And by using this word “beginning” to describe what Mark is writing about, he implies that there is a continued effect of the Lord Jesus Christ’s infinite power. There is an ongoing effect of His work in all of the centuries that follow – right up to the present day and unto the end of the age. How this spoke to Jewish expectations at the time. You know, we often get more excited about things that involve a longer period of anticipation as opposed to those things that we don’t anticipate for very long. I am anticipating next week’s fishing trip. And I have some mild anticipation for that. But you know, if there is something that you are looking forward to for much longer than a week, you tend to rate it more importantly and get more excited about it. Marriage at the end of one or two or three years’ engagement, those are the things that you really look forward to, much better than a fishing trip. Graduating after three years, a long anticipation – much better again. Holiday a year off – much better than the fishing trip also. Well what we deal with here is an anticipation that was building not just over three weeks, not just over three years, not even just over 300 years of radio silence, this was an anticipation that came over many centuries since the time of the fall – over thousands of years. And it is the answer, the solution to the fall. It is the answer to everything that’s gone wrong in the human race and it is the answer to everything that gone wrong in your own personal life. And how sad it is, that so many people do not see it that way. They don’t have any interest, any anticipation or any excitement about these things. And perhaps, if we, as God’s people, captured and conveyed more of a sense of excitement about that gospel, perhaps then others around us might just sit up and take a little bit more notice of what we say. But of course, God is the only one who gives the proper reaction to that.

Well, we need to focus some more on John the Baptist because the text does. And this is not because Mark thinks that John the Baptist is more important that Jesus. It is not because he thinks that the activity of John the Baptist is more important than the incarnation of Christ, but because John the Baptist helps us understand the coming of Christ. It helps us understand why He had to be born into this world and carry on and do the other things that He did. And John helps us understand that in three ways. He helps us understand that in his role as messenger, he helps us understand it in his role as prophet and also as baptiser.

We look at this in our second and final point, the Messenger Preparing for the Gospel.

First John prepares for the Lord Jesus’ coming, by acting as a messenger (v2) and the word that is used there is the same word as for angel. So John, like the angels, is a messenger. And also verses 4 and 7 – He is a herald. It is translated here by the word ‘preaching’. But it literally means ‘heralding’. And this is what Isaiah 40:3 prophesied. “A voice crying in the wilderness, clearing the way for the Lord, making a smooth highway for God, preparing His way”. That’s what he’s talking about in Mark 1: 2 and 3. And that quote from Isaiah 40 is also combined a little bit with some of what is said in Malachai 3:1 which talks about the messenger “clearing the way” for the Messiah’s coming. Some have added a little bit of Exodus 23:20 melded in there, which speaks of God’s angel messengers clearing the way for Israel through the wilderness, in other words speaking of the Exodus. In the ancient world when kings conducted their royal procession through their lands, and they sometimes did that, they do a royal tour and they go around to all the major cities and towns right throughout their country and when they did that, it was necessary for the wilderness areas to have the roads and tracks remade, improved, or even made completely new. Wet areas had to be raised up, other rocky and hilly areas had to be levelled or smoothed down to make it easy for the king to come through on his procession. And the herald would go before that king announcing that he was coming to that area and calling upon the people of that area to help prepare the way, to smooth the way for the coming of that king on his royal tour. This was John the Baptist’s job. To act as the herald. Proclaiming the coming of the King. But instead of Israel going out to prepare the way for Him by making roads or anything of that kind, the message was that the Lord Jesus was coming to lead them, to prepare the way for them to go on a new exodus, to deliver them from their sins because they couldn’t do it themselves.

So we see John as the herald. Not just hark the herald angels sing, but John the herald, John the angel as it literally has it, John the herald, the messenger of God’s message, the good news. The message that is good – verse 2. And we see how he does that, how he builds expectations. Expectations of the king’s arrival – of the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ. He does that by referring to Christ as “the coming one” in verse 7. And that’s a messianic term from the Old Testament. The Jews knew it well. Their Messiah was the coming one. We find that language in Daniel 7:13. We find it even earlier in Genesis 49:10, we find it in Malachai 3:1, and elsewhere.

John also prepares for the coming one, by pointing out that He is much more powerful, He is so much stronger, so much greater than John, that John’s not even fit to until His sandals and take them off His feet. Which by the way was slaves’ work in the ancient world. It was one of the most menial tasks, after someone had dirtied their feet on the road, the slave would then take off their shoes and clean the master’s feet – that was the lowest of the low tasks that could be done – and John says I am not even fit to do the servant’s work for my Master, I am not even fit to take off His sandals and clean His feet. Now you think about the implications of that and the effect that that must have had on the people listening to John. Here’s this man who is attracting huge crowds. They are coming from all over Judea to see him and to hear him and to be baptised by him, and he says, Someone is coming Who is so much greater than I am, that I can’t even act like a slave to Him, I am not even worthy for that. To put it into today’s terms, you can imagine the top rock band of 2013, whoever that might be, imagine them saying at one of their performances or on a TV appearance, you know there is a new band that’s been formed, and we’ve heard them play and they are so good, that we are not even fit to hand them their drumsticks. Or perhaps the top actor of 2013, won more awards than anybody else, says look there’s a new actor and he’s so good, that he makes me look like an amateur. You can imagine that people would be interested – they would be looking, they would want to hear that band, they would want to see that actor perform.

John makes it even bigger than that. He goes on and he says this is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit. This is the Son of God. The One Who comes and who saves and who baptises with the Holy Spirit, not with water like I’m doing, says John, who am I compared to that. Jesus began His ministry in a situation of huge messianic expectation. And John helped prepare that expectation by these words. John also primed Israel by coming as a wilderness prophet. Not only fulfilling the Old Testament prophesies about the voice crying in the wilderness, but also by reminding them of the prophet Elijah. Elijah was very much a wilderness prophet. He was identified with the wilderness, the wilderness was a symbol of the old Testament for judgement.   
When God would take the fertile lands of His people when they rebelled, He would reduce those fertile areas sometimes to a wilderness. A wilderness spoke of judgement. But it also spoke to Israel of hope – the hope of God’s deliverance of exodus through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It had those connotations for Israel. And so John comes - located in the wilderness like Elijah. Eating the kind of food of the wilderness that Elijah must also have eaten. Locusts and wild honey – he must have eaten those. He also dressed like Elijah – who was a hairy man with the leather girdle bound about his loins 2 Kings 1:8. Wilderness clothing as well. And John had a similar message to Elijah. The message was basically side with God, repent of your sins or experience the wrath to come. And that was John’s message as well. Jesus even said that John was the Elijah to come as per the Jewish expectation in Jesus’ time, that before the coming of the Messiah, Elijah would return. That was the expectation of many and so Jesus says – yes, John is the Elijah to come. He says that in Mark 9:9-13. But it is explained in Luke 1:17 that he came in the spirit and the power of Elijah, not literally Elijah – John 1:21 shows that it wasn’t literal. John the Baptist was not some reincarnated Elijah – not literally – but in the spirit and the power with the same kind of message as Elijah. For the appearance of Elijah in the Old Testament and the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness in the New, this was a powerful warning to Israel to be ready for the Messiah. To be ready for this new exodus, or face the judgment of God.

To leave this in no doubt, John also comes as a baptiser. The Jews were already familiar with washings. With baptisms. They were familiar from all of the ceremonial cleansing from defilement required in the Old Testament, for example when you touched unclean things. They may also have been familiar with baptism as a way of indicating a clean, fresh start when you converted to the Old Testament religion, and John hooks into this Old Testament background by preaching, by heralding, that there is a great need for repentance from sins, there is a great need for God’s forgiveness and for His cleansing and it is needed more urgently than ever because the Messiah is about to come. Baptism was a sign of that, it was a sign of the cleansing that God graciously gives to those who genuinely repented. And we read that huge numbers of people from Jerusalem and all over Judea responded to that. They heard the heralding, they heard the preaching, they confessed their sins and they were baptised in the Jordan. And by the way, it doesn’t say that they were totally immersed in the Jordan. We don’t know what the mode of this baptism was – whether they were dunked in the Jordan, whether they were splashed with water, or sprinkled with water from the Jordan – we are not told.

This strongly reinforced the expectation of a Messiah who was about to come to cleanse and to save the afflicted, but also would come to judge the unrepentant. And therefore, since He was about to come, the people must come to Him with repentant hearts, confessing their sins and seeking the salvation which He alone brings and they can only do that if God works in their lives granting them that desire to repent.

John therefore is the great preparer. The herald, the prophet, the baptiser, paving the way for someone greater. Why don’t people today listen to that? Why don’t people today receive that message and seek to be prepared by it? The whole country did in John’s time. They heard, they listened, and many were prepared. But who today bothers with the Baptist? Who today looks with great expectation for the Messiah? Where are the crowds in church seeking the truth? Up till a few years ago you might even have some hope that around Christmas time you would get a few people who perhaps only come to church on Christmas, maybe Christmas and Easter as they say, but you used to get that a few years ago, but now such people are few and far between. People today are more concerned about what Santa is bringing. Or perhaps even more to the point, they are concerned about how to pay for what Santa is bringing.

And one of the reasons for that is because they don’t see their sins. They don’t see the need for confession of their sins before God, they don’t see the need for repentance of their sins. They don’t see the need of cleansing and above all, they do not see the need of a saviour.

In addition to that they don’t believe in prophets. They don’t believe that God can deliver an absolute truth in this world. The only prophet they believe in is the one spelt p-r-o-f-i-t, not the other prophet. And they don’t see God as the Almighty King and ruler, and therefore they don’t want to listen to anyone who says “prepare the way, smooth the way, for the coming of the King”.

And yet, the herald’s message is just as relevant and just as vital as it ever was. Because the axe is still laid to the root of the tree. Judgement is still coming. But the Messiah, God’s anointed, the Son of God, the coming One, has now come. And He has brought salvation. A salvation that came to the fulfilment of thousands of years of preparation. And He is coming again, as I say, to bring judgement.

Therefore confess your sins, repent of them, but know also the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, that is the promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

AMEN

Let us pray

Heavenly Father, would you enable us to recognise our sins, to confess them and to repent of them before You. To see our great need for salvation and cleansing. Would you enable us also to see in Jesus Christ the only solution to this need. To accept Him as our only Messiah and Saviour as the Son of God. We pray it in His name, AMEN.