

## The King's Preparation

### *The Servant King & the King's Servants: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 1*

Mark 1:1-13

September 11, 2022

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In the third century, a writer spoke of the “ocean-flood of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> By this he meant that Jesus, Jesus’ followers, and Jesus’ influence, were sweeping over the world. Writing in the twentieth century, historian Jaroslav Pelikan—himself a Christian—tried to capture how that ocean-flood shaped the modern world. He opens his book, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the Culture of the World*, with these memorable words:

Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of Western culture for almost twenty centuries. If it were possible, with some sort of supermagnet, to pull up out of that history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name, how much would be left? It is from his birth that most of the human race dates its calendars, it is by his name that millions curse and in his name that millions pray.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, writing in the twenty-first century, historian Tom Holland—himself not a Christian—reckons with Jesus’ lasting influence on the modern world’s moral assumptions: that we value every human being, assume the strong should help the weak, and think equality a non-negotiable virtue. In his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, Holland searches for the roots of these ideas. He writes,

To live in a Western country is to live in a society still utterly saturated by Christian concepts and assumptions.... Assumptions that I had grown up with—about how a society should be properly organized, and the principles that it should uphold—were not bred of classical antiquity, still less of ‘human nature’, but very distinctively of that civilization’s Christian past.<sup>3</sup>

The honest historian must conclude that the world we currently live in, with its moral inclinations and assumptions about human worth, flows from a spring in Nazareth of Galilee. This fall, we will return to

that spring. We'll revisit the source of the ocean-flood of Christ. To do so, we will go back to the earliest account of the life of Jesus—the Gospel of Mark.

Most scholars agree that Mark's Gospel was the first to be written. Matthew, Luke, and John were written after Mark's and with Mark's in mind. It's also a very close account of Jesus' life, based on the personal testimony of one of Jesus' closest disciples, Peter. Bishop Papias, who lived from roughly 60-130 AD, was personally acquainted with eyewitnesses from the days of Jesus and said the following about this Gospel: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

Mark is the John Mark from the Bible. Though not a disciple of Jesus, he was a disciple of Peter, and along with his family, was at the center of the early Christian movement. His cousin is Barnabas (Acts 4:36); his mother's house was a hub for Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12-16); he accompanied Paul on a missionary journey; and, despite a falling out with Paul at one point, was later reconciled and worked closely with Paul (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24), even being summoned by Paul during Paul's last imprisonment in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11). When we read the sixteen chapters of the Gospel of Mark, we are hearing the voice of Peter, through a close friend of Peter and Paul, a man whose family was at the center of the events that unfold through the book of Acts. The Holy Spirit inspired John Mark to write this Gospel. Mark's Gospel is also cosmopolitan. Written in Rome in the late 50s, it's aimed at an audience of Latin-speaking Romans, Greek-speaking Greeks, and Aramaic-speaking Jews. Mark's Gospel is written to the world.

Mark's main themes are two:

***Jesus as Servant King:*** His Gospel is an apology for the Kingship of Jesus. Jesus is Lord of all, and the cross was not an accident, but the very way Jesus crushed his enemies and was enthroned. Shockingly, Mark says, the good news is that the King came "not to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:44-45).

***Jesus' Followers as Servants:*** Secondly, Mark stresses discipleship. Jesus' followers will look like Jesus; they will take up their cross (Mark 8) and lead the Gospel movement, from a posture of selfless servanthood (Mark 10).

Hence the title of our sermon series: *The Servant King & the King's Servants*. The Gospel is good news because God has come to serve humankind's deepest needs by dying for our sins. We begin our study where Mark does—with the beginning. Verse 1 acts as a title, and reads, "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). This is a Gospel—it's *Good News*. And it's the good news of Jesus Christ.

Jesus won't speak, however, for another thirteen verses. From verses 2-13, Mark draws the reader into the *beginning* of the Gospel. Meaning, the Gospel has a beginning, ongoing middle, and an ultimate end, or goal. One cannot understand this Gospel unless they first grasp its beginning. As C. S. Lewis once wrote, "If you join at eleven o'clock a conversation which began at eight you will often not see the real bearing of what is said."<sup>5</sup> When the curtain rises for Mark's Gospel, there is a rich history already well underway.

To grasp the beginning of the Gospel, however, is not merely about gaining the pre-requisite knowledge for understanding. It's just as much about *preparation*—it's about being prepared, in mind and heart, to receive the Gospel. Grasping the beginning of the Gospel, is not about gaining the prerequisite knowledge to *understand it*—the way, say, Algebra 1 is a prerequisite for understanding Algebra 2. Rather, it's even more so about undergoing the necessary *preparation to receive it*—the way pre-marital counseling prepares a couple not just to understand marriage, but to emotionally and relationally *receive it*.

Twice in the prophecies recounted in vv. 2-3 the note of emphasis is *preparation*: a messenger will be sent to "prepare your way." The voice crying in the wilderness cries, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

### **The Gospel begins with a preparation—a preparation of the heart.**

This first passage runs from vv. 2-13 and naturally divides into three sections, which we may give the following headings: (1) *The Preparation of God [1:2-3]*, (2) *The Preparation of John [1:4-8]*; and (3) *The Preparation of the Son [1:9-13]*.

## **I. The Preparation of God**

After his title sentence, Mark takes the reader back to Israel's prophets, highlighting, in particular, Isaiah.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (Mark 1:2-3).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins long ago, in God’s work through the Israelites. These prophecies foretell a time when someone would be sent by God to help, to save, God’s people. A striking fact about this person emerges if we look closely at the actors in these verses—there are three:

Take the first clause, *“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.”*

- The first actor is the sender, *“I send.”* Looking back to the quotation in the Old Testament, this is God. God does the sending.
- The second actor is the messenger, the one sent, *“I send my messenger.”* This person proves to be John the Baptist, as we see in a moment.
- But there is a third person, referred to here obliquely with the personal pronoun, *“your”* and reference to their *“face”* and *“way,”* *“I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.”*

The identity of this person was cause for much speculation in the days leading up to Jesus’ life. This might be a great prophet, a great leader, or even a Messiah—a man anointed to be king.

But Mark very carefully attaches this prophecy in vs 2, from Malachi to another prophecy in vs. 3, which is from Isaiah. Here we have the same theme of a messenger preparing the way for a special someone—but we are told who that someone is. And it’s staggering:

... the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’ (Mark 1:3; Isaiah 40:3).

God sends the messenger, John the Baptist, to prepare the way for the coming of God. The term “Lord” (κύριος), in verse 3, translates to the Hebrew word in Isaiah 40:3, “Yahweh” (יהוה)—which is the all-

important name of the God of Israel. Within the first three verses of his Gospel, Mark tells the reader that whoever this person ends up being as we read on, he is the coming of Yahweh—He is the Lord with us.

We can pause here to note an initial point. The Gospel is not spoken into a vacuum, but into a long, deep, and, at times, very sad story. It is the story of God's people, Israel, which is a microcosm of the story of humanity at large. After humanity fell into sin, God elected Israel as the people through whom He'd bring redemption. And on Israel, several medicines, several solutions, had been tried and found wanting: The law was given so they'd know what obedience was, but this did not cure her. Priests were given, but they could not cleanse her. Leaders were given—Judges and Kings—but these could not deliver her. Prophets were sent, but they could not deter her. As the Lord finally says through the prophet Jeremiah of Israel's condition:

This is what the Lord says: "Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing. There is no one to plead your cause, no remedy for your sore, no healing for you.... Why do you cry out over your wound, your pain that has no cure? Because of your great guilt and many sins" (Jeremiah 30:12-13,15).

**The Gospel begins with a preparation—preparing people to recognize their deepest need.**

The need beneath all your needs is your soul's need for God. Friends, do you recognize this need behind and beneath all your other needs? Parents, beyond your kids' needs to study, make good grades, and get into good schools so they can have a good earthly life—do you know that their deepest need is their God need?

The beginning of the Gospel prepares us by revealing our deepest need—for God to come. *Does it further prepare us for receiving Him?* With this, we turn to the preparatory work of John the Baptist—who "prepares the way of the Lord."

## II. The Preparation of John

Charles Dickens found his novel *David Copperfield* to be his favorite. It was the most autobiographical. The story follows the maturing of the young man by the name of Copperfield. Through marriage, the death of his young wife, a season of despondence and wondering, and finally finding peace, Copperfield

enters sought-after contentment. A repeated phrase touches on the book's main storyline. Often, Copperfield refers to his "undisciplined heart."<sup>6</sup> With this phrase he refers to his youthful inability to reason properly, as well as his consistent inability to know his truer, deeper, feelings. "I cannot so completely penetrate the mystery of my own heart," he laments.<sup>7</sup>

The Bible—which deeply influences Dicken's thought and writing—knows of this malady. It refers to it variously as the "hardness of the heart," "blindness of the heart," "waywardness" or "rebelliousness" of the heart. It is the particularly complex and completely devastating reality of our sin-nature: *our hearts are deformed*. John the Baptist's ministry aims at one thing: making a way for God to enter into a broken and hardened heart. The language of repentance, which summarizes John's preaching and baptizing ministry, is a matter of heart work.

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4).

Repentance was not a new idea for John's audience. But coupling it with this new phenomenon, baptism, was. The Jews had all types of rules and ceremonies to aid in repentance: fasting, wearing sackcloth, making sacrifices, and observing days of penitence. But the prophets would often rail against the shallowness of these outward actions, saying, "rend your hearts, not your garments."

Repentance carries two ideas. First, it's a turning away from wrong-doing and replacing it with right-doing. Second, it's a return to wholehearted devotion to God. It's ethical *and* relational.

The added act of Baptism signals that John is calling for a radical type of repentance—one that reaches for the forgiveness of sins. *Why the focus on the forgiveness of sin?* Because the forgiveness of sins is central to changing one's relational status with God from under God's judgment to being embraced by God's love. It's more than a legal reality; it's a relational one.

From John's message, we can draw another point for our own lives. If our greatest need is *for* God, we must prepare our hearts to receive God. **This preparation happens through repentance.**

If we are not careful, we can prepare for the Gospel in a way that's not deep enough. We can divide the world between the oppressed and the oppressors. And then assume that the way to *prepare* to receive

the Gospel is to point out the sins done against you, as grounds for God to come into your life. Of course, God is for the oppressed—He delivers Israel from Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. But God always goes to a deeper issue in Israel: it's not just outer oppression that's her problem—it's her own sin.

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn said while imprisoned in a soviet labor camp: “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart.<sup>8</sup>” Not the sins of others against me, but my sins against God, make for the movement of repentance.

We can also fall into the error of thinking God comes to us because of our own self-worth. As though the problem the Gospel fixes is God's problem of missing us so much. Again, this is partially true—God loves us. But the vein that the medicine of the Gospel is applied to is the vein of proper self-abasement—that of the tax collector:

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as *his* eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18:13).

We must turn to God with total seriousness, be rigorously honest about ourselves, and offer unconditional surrender to His Lordship and will. That is repentance. And that is how God's messenger, John the Baptist, prepares hearts for God's coming.

### III. The Preparation of the Son

Jesus is introduced in connection with his hometown: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee” (v.9). Jesus will not speak before v.14, but between v. 9 and 13 Jesus is prepared for his ministry in two ways: baptism and temptation.

#### 1. Baptism

In his baptism, Jesus is reminded of his sonship:

... Jesus ... was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a

dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:9-11).

Here we have the Trinity displayed: the Father speaking over the Son, the Spirit descending upon the Son, and the Son submitting in perfect obedience and love to the Father. Recall that in our study of Genesis 1 (last Spring) we noted that all Persons of the Trinity were at work in Creation: The Father spoke, the Spirit was hovering over the chaos, and all things were created through the Son (Genesis 1:1-3; John 1:1-3). Just as all Persons of the Trinity were at work in Creation, so too all three Persons of the Trinity work together in Redemption. And as John the Baptist said in verse 8, Jesus will offer a baptism different than John’s, “he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The same God who made the world is at work to redeem the world.

And notice the emphasis on the baptism: Jesus’ sonship and the Father’s love for him. This will shape Jesus’ ministry deeply. Before Jesus does any ministry, he must know that his Father is for him, and he must be utterly submitted to His Father’s will. Jesus will face the opinions of men, the doubts of men, and the violence of men. The only way he can follow God through this is if he knows deep in his heart that his existence, his will, his vocation, and his success, are from God.

*If this is true for Jesus, how much more for his followers?* Through Jesus, we are made sons and daughters of God (Romans 8:14-17). And like Jesus, we must live in this world with a deep assurance that we are God’s children. The love of God, will of God, and voice of God, are what ground and orient us—not the opinions of men.

Like Jesus, our God-orientation is what protects us from disorientation. Our sonship and daughtership prepare us for the ministry of the Gospel.

## 2. Temptation

After Jesus’ baptism, verses 12-13, “The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.” And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him” (Mark 1:13).

As Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness—where they failed in their temptations to sin and grumble—, Jesus now undergoes his own test with Satan. And unlike Israel—or anyone else—Jesus does not



succumb to temptation. This episode, however, introduces Jesus to a second reality that will be important to know going forward: Jesus has a Father in Heaven who loves him, but Jesus also has an enemy on earth who hates him.

Satan lurks behind all the problems in the Gospel; Jesus knows that the battle is not ultimately with flesh and blood, but with Satan and Evil. And only Jesus is strong enough to defeat Satan—and he does so—paradoxically—on the Cross. We too should be aware that behind the things we see, lies another reality—a spiritual one. And that the real opponent is Satan and Evil. *Do you have anyone who can fight this Enemy?* Jesus has come to face him and fight him for you.

God prepares us for the Gospel—for his arrival in our lives—often by taking us into the wilderness. It may be that you need to get alone with God, alone with your needs and sins, and ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart to receive the Son of God—who is the only being that can turn a life of bad news, into good news, Gospel.

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## Endnotes

1. *Acts of Thomas*, 31 (Syriac version). Accessed online September 17, 2022: <http://gnosis.org/library/actthom.htm>
2. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.
3. Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2019), 13, 17.
4. Cited in Eusebius, *Historica Ecclesiastica*, 3.39.15. See D.A. Caron and Douglas Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 173. Richard Bauckham notes that “Mark’s Gospel,” by how its structured, “claims Peter as its main eyewitness source” and “it tells the story predominantly (though by no means exclusively) from Peter’s perspective.” Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 179
5. C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 200-201.
6. E.g., Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (Penguin Classics, New York: NY), 776, 819, 820.

7. Ibid, 823.

8. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 312.