

Jason Upchurch - Mark 1:4-8 - The Good News of Jesus's Baptism - Part 1

If you've read the Bible much you know that when you transition from the OT to the NT there are a lot of changes. From the last pages of Malachi to the beginning of the gospel narratives is something like 400 years.

Scholars used to call that time the 400 silent years because God spoke nothing to the Jews for 400 years. No biblical book was written, no prophet raised up, no word from God. It was a deafening silence.

The Jews during the time that Malachi prophesied had fallen into the exact same sins that their ancestors had. They had known peace and prosperity under David and Solomon some 1,000 years before Jesus but then fell into sin. God had used Assyria and Babylon to judge his people - Israel in the north was wiped out completely. Judah in the south was hauled off to Babylon in 583BC. But God in his mercy allowed the Jews to come back into the land.

And for a time, during Nehemiah and Ezra and the minor prophets it seemed that maybe Israel had learned her lesson. But they didn't. They sinned just like their fathers and so the last pages of the OT in Malachi were the last God spoke for all that time.

In the intervening period there was a lot that happened. There were wars, political battles, theology battles. You can read about some of that in Josephus and some of the Apocrypha. Some of it in background information on the NT.

Usually they refer to it now as 2nd Temple Judaism. If you remember Solomon constructed the original Temple, but that Temple was destroyed when the Jews were exiled to Babylon. The Temple was rebuilt after they Jews returned. And improved and modified until it was given a magnificent overhaul by Herod the Great. But the way in which Jews worshipped at that second Temple is so drastically different most scholars now refer to it as 2nd Temple Judaism.

So when we open the pages of the NT and it's like entering another dimension. Now there are Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes. Who are those guys? Who's this Herod guy and why is he king in Israel?

And one of the unique features that we've never seen before is Baptism. What is this whole baptism thing? Where did that come from and why is that a thing? Because not only do we have baptism, but we have a guy who is defined by that very word: John the Baptizer - John the Baptist. Or as my seminary professor called him: J the B.

Who is he, what's he doing? Why is he defined by this one act? And, if he's baptizing people as a means to show that they are repentant for their sins, why in the world does he baptize Jesus who had no sins? What's up with that?

That's what we're tackling this morning. Who is this guy, what's the purpose of his ministry?

What I want you to understand is that John is the transition character between the OT and the NT.

How many of you know how to drive a stick shift? When you drive stick shift the main thing you have to understand is the clutch. If you're in park, fine. If you're in 1st gear, fine. The trick is operating the clutch because it's the clutch that gets you from one gear to another. But the clutch isn't the point - the point is to go. So although the clutch is important, all it does is transition from one thing to another.

That's John: John's a clutch. He's an amazingly important part of God's plan of redemption, but he's just transitional figure that ultimately transitions us to Jesus. And his ministry is part of the good news of Jesus because he really is the forerunner of Jesus. He prepares the people of God to meet the Son of God.

So we're diving deep into the ministry of John the Baptist and I think this is going to be fascinating to see how God worked through the ministry of John to prepare the way for Jesus.

1) John picks up where the OT left off. **Read 2-5**

What Mark is cluing us in on is that John's ministry was very much a fulfillment of God's design for the Messiah. John was not an afterthought or someone random. John was integral to God's saving work.

This quote that Mark gives us is actually something of a hodgepodge of several quotes from the OT - 3 to be precise. He attributes it only to Isaiah and I'll tell you why in a minute.

But first, sometimes what we need to understand is that how the gospel writers frame Jesus's life is telling a bigger story than what we first might think.

A lot of times we read something like this where it says "as it was written" and what we think should happen is that we go back to that OT passage and it's just a simple explanation.

You almost think if you go back to these passages that you'll see a simple explanation from God, "I'm going to send the Messiah, but right before I do I'm going to send a guy in camel's hair and he's going to get everything ready." It's a little more involved than that.

Think about how Mark's narrative flows. There's a prophecy about a messenger who will prepare God's people, he will show the way. Then Jesus shows up, he goes into water where he is called God's Son and then immediately goes out into the wilderness for 40 days.

Do you know what Israel is called when God threatens to bring plagues against Egypt? God's son. God delivers Israel through the water and where do they go? The wilderness for 40 years - not days, but years. Jesus is depicted as the New Israel. So the passages that Mark cites here not only prophecy the Messiah, they prophecy his role as the true Israel, the true Son of God.

Turn to Exo. 23:20. Now, **Mark 1:2** is almost a word for word quote of this passage - at least the first part of it. Here's what you're going to see: this is a very weird verse to quote as a "fulfillment" passage because this isn't really a prophecy at all.

What we have here in **Exo 23** is that Israel has left Egypt, gone through the Red Sea, they've been to Mt Sinai and now they're in the wilderness. They're getting ready to head to the Promised Land. And here's what God says. **Read 20-22**

So the angel is going to go ahead of Israel - God's Son - and prepare the way for him into the Promised Land. This isn't primarily about the future Messiah or his forerunner.

And it's interesting that Mark would cite this passage because when John shows up he's in the Promised Land. And he's preaching to Israel. Why quote this passage?

It's because Mark is taking Israel's story and applying it to John and Jesus. John is now the messenger - the "angel," same word - who goes before the Son of God who goes through the water and is now in the wilderness.

And you say that's a really weird thing to do. Well, not really. God does this all the time. For thousands of years people got married. Then along comes Jesus and Paul tells us that this whole time marriage was actually a picture of something. What was it a picture of? Christ and the Church. This real physical reality was a picture of a greater reality.

The real physical reality of Israel in the desert was a picture of Messiah, the Son of God, leading his people to the true Promised Land.

Look at Isa. 40:1-5. This is the second verse Mark uses. Now, Isaiah 40 is a huge transition in the book of Isaiah. The first 39 chapters have been a threat of doom and punishment of Israel because of her sin. There's some hope, some light, but not a lot.

Here we have this glorious transition to the redeeming work of God in the lives of his people. The mood changes drastically in Isaiah here at chapter 40 throughout the rest of the book. It's here we see that the Lord is promising redemption, Isaiah 53 the suffering servant, grace, the new covenant and the New Heavens and New Earth. **Read 1-2**

The whole point of this section is the comfort of God's people. Warfare is over, discipline is done. Israel had sinned gravely against God - so much so that he sent in Assyria and Babylon to come-Lesley wipe Israel out of the Promised Land. It was that bad.

But God never forgets his covenant with Israel because he is faithful and kind and gracious. And now he's going to begin a new work among his people. **Read 3-11**

So I read the whole thing because this is loaded. First of all we have this guy sent ahead to tell Israel about the coming of the Lord. Who is this guy? Well in ancient times when the King was going to come visit your town he would send a herald out ahead of time. The herald came and told you to get ready. Clean up your town. Every valley shall be lifted up, every hill brought low - clean up your roads for the kings. There's no limos with suspension. He's on a chariot - give him a nice road, clean yourselves up.

By the way - who is the King? **Read 3**

Yahweh is King. This is the divine name of God. The herald is preparing the way of Yahweh. John shows up, a herald in the wilderness to prepare the way of who? Yahweh.

Yahweh is going to show up, in power and glory - he could blow away all of humanity as soon as blow on a flower - but instead he comes as a gentle shepherd carrying little baby sheep in his arms.

Mark uses this citation to key us in that Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh. From here on out in Isaiah's book, salvation and redemption and renewal are they key themes. Isaiah looks forward to a glorious future revolving around Messiah.

That's why I think Mark specifically mentions Isaiah because Jesus is the one whom all these promises revolve around.

Look at Malachi 3. This is the last verse that is cited by Mark. And I mentioned a couple weeks ago that usually when we think of prophecy and fulfillment in the NT - how the NT quotes the OT - we want simple prophecy and simple fulfillment - like really obvious connections.

And what I encouraged you to think of these are more like quoting movie lines and modifying them for your situation. Mark and the other NT authors are not misusing Scripture. They're not twisting Scripture. But they're also not using it in a simple rifle-shot fashion like what we might want.

They're using Scripture to make some amazing links, like we quote movies or books in our day to day conversation. And I hope what you see is actually some beautiful connections.

Here, the emphasis is on the ministry of John the Baptist. **Read 2:17-3:4**

Remember that Malachi is the last book of the OT. It's the book right before the 400 silent years and this is the last little bit of the last book. And God promises to send a messenger who will prepare his way. "Prepare my way before me."

And actually the "prepare my way" is the only section of Malachi that Mark quotes. But it's enough of an allusion that we recognize what John's role is. He's the one preparing God's way. Just like he's the herald of Isaiah, he's the messenger of Malachi who prepares the people for the Lord. He's going to be a refining fire - he will burn out impurities in people. And like fuller's soap. A fuller was someone who washed clothes and mended them. He's sent to clean the people up. He calls Israel to repentance and faithfulness to the Lord. Notice this too. **Read 4:5-6**

The messenger that God is going to send is Elijah. And Elijah is going to be the one to prepare the way for Jesus. **Turn back to Mark 1.**

Now, the question is: Is it literally Elijah? Remember Elijah was taken up into heaven by a chariot in the OT. He didn't actually die. So maybe God is going to send him back.

Well, not quite. God doesn't send Elijah, but someone like Elijah. **Read 4-6**

So we'll get to the other stuff, but this description of John is rather weird. He sounds like a homeless caveman who has a really weird diet. The gospel writers don't give us this description so that we think John is weird. They give us this description so we'll understand that this is the Elijah Malachi was talking about.

In **2 Kings 1:8** Elijah is described as wearing a garment of hair and having a leather belt around his waist.

And, from other passages, we learn that both John and Elijah were under a Nazarite vow - they couldn't drink wine, they couldn't cut their hair, and they couldn't touch dead people.

Luke makes the connection plain for us in **1:17** when the angel tells Zechariah, John's father, that John will go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Jesus also makes that clear in **Matthew 17:9-13** when he says Elijah has come and the disciples finally get that he's talking about John.

Why all this fuss about John coming? Because this is the dawn Christ. This is the first light of God's saving plan in Jesus.

You know how every spring we're all tired of the cold and dark? And everyone has cabin fever and wants plant gardens and flowers? Usually in Deer Park we look for a sign: we look at Mt Spokane. If there's still snow on Mt Spokane, there's still a good chance of freezing at night. So we're constantly watching, constantly waiting. Please summer come. And then one day the snow is gone. It's here! The time is here. That's John.

And that's why everyone is coming to him. He's Elijah in the desert. He's preaching powerfully - so much so that everyone believes he's a prophet. So God has finally sent someone and it seems like this someone is the Elijah that was promised to come right before Messiah.

Salvation is about to happen. So John picks up where the OT left off.

2) John baptizes. What's up with that? **Read 4-8**

So for Christians, we are used to the idea baptism. The word baptism means to immerse into something. If you have Oreos, you baptize those babies in a glass of milk. You don't sprinkle, you don't dip your finger in the milk and draw the shape of a cross on the Oreo. You plunge it into milk.

That's what the word means. And that's what John was doing. He was out in the wilderness and he plunged people under the water. **Read 10**

Just an obvious point, in order to come up out of the water, you have to first be down in the water.

John 3:23 says that John was also baptizing near Aenon near Salim because the water was plentiful there.

Whenever we see baptism in the Bible we see dunking. Where did this come from? **Look at Acts 2:37-41.** This is obviously after Jesus's death and resurrection. But the Jews had been baptizing for some time prior to Jesus. **Read**

Now, think about this. Where are the apostles when they baptize these people? They're in Jerusalem probably near the Temple. And near the Temple in Jesus's time were massive baptismal pools; immersion pools.

And although the history is a little vague, it seems as though they were used for festival pilgrims from out of town right before they entered the Temple. Here's the really interesting thing: the immersion ceremony that the Jews did was for Gentile converts when they converted to Judaism (IVP Background commentary). Gentiles who wanted to become Jewish got immersed. The men also needed to be circumcised, but to enter the Temple, the Holy place of God, you had to be immersed.

Then John comes on the scene and he does the most unthinkable thing: he calls Jews to be immersed. He calls the faithful of Israel to show themselves by being baptized. What John is doing is signaling that God is creating a new people. People whose lives revolve around heartfelt repentance and ultimately around Jesus.

That's what baptism showed: that a person was repentant and now following God in faithfulness.

Check this out in **Acts 19:1-7**. We need to understand that John had an incredible ministry. It was prolific in many ways. One way we know this is here in Acts 19. Paul is almost 700 miles away in Corinth some 20 years later. **Read**

John's ministry is still shining all this time later. Interestingly, these guys were rebaptized into the name of Jesus even though they had already been legitimately baptized into John's baptism. Why? Did they already claim to have repented? Weren't they truly following God's ways? Yes, but now the issue is whether they would continue to follow John, or follow Jesus. So they follow Jesus.

Why did they speak in tongues and prophesy? I think that was the way in which they were shown that the apostles' message was legitimate and the way in which the apostles knew their faith was legitimate.

So John is the link to the OT. John's baptism gives way to Christian baptism.

3) So John connects the OT with the New. He comes baptizing. Why does he baptize? What's the purpose.

3 Reasons: 1) to prepare the people. Remember that's what Malachi said: the messenger would come to prepare the people. We see they understood that clearly. **Read Acts 19:4**

John was calling people to repentance. We call people to repentance. Repentance is a metanoia in Greek. It's changing your mind about sin to the point of changing your life. It's not just feeling sorry about sin, though it includes that. It's knowing that your sin truly grieves God. And because it grieves God it grieves you too. And it grieves you to the point of actually turning from it. It's a change of desire and a change of life brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit.

So he came to prepare people. 2) He came to identify Jesus. **Read 4**

Part of John's ministry was to unveil the Messiah. He was out preaching, but even in his preaching he knew Messiah was coming. He knew his role in God's plan. **Look at John 1:29-34**. This is John's account and it's helpful for us to understand that John was preparing a people. But his mission was also to identify Messiah. **Read**

John says he didn't know who the Messiah was. He knew Jesus, he probably grew up playing with him and knew his character. That's why he says in the other gospels: "You need to be baptized by me??" I need to be baptized by you." He knew Jesus was holy and godly. He just didn't know the whole story. Until Jesus went down into the water and the Holy Spirit came out of heaven and landed on Jesus like a dove. Then everything clicked for John.

Oh! He's not just my godly cousin. He's actually the Lamb of God, the Messiah, who takes away the sin of the world. That's why John says "I didn't know him" - I didn't know he was the Messiah - but that's why I came out. Because God revealed to me that at some point I'm going to be baptizing people and Messiah will be revealed.

And when Messiah was revealed, John knew his time was basically over. **Read 35-37**

The disciples are like, well if John's pointing to this guy, let's follow this guy. And John is fine with that. In fact, remember John 3:30 is where John says Jesus must increase and I must what? Decrease. That's the whole point of John's life and our whole point as well. We must decrease as we point people to Jesus.

Look back in Mark 1. So John prepares the people, John identifies Jesus.

3) John points people to Jesus. **Read 7-8**

It's not enough just to prepare people and identify who Jesus is. John points people to Jesus. This is before he knows that Jesus is the Christ. And he's saying, "Look, I'm not the main attraction. I'm the warm up act to point you to someone so powerful, so amazing, so awesome that I'm not even worthy to touch his dirty, nasty shoes."

Washing feet and taking care of someone's shoes was reserved for the lowest of the slaves in ancient times. John's saying this Messiah who is coming is so great, so awesome I'm not worthy of the lowest task in his Kingdom.

I'm dunking you with water, but he will dunk you with the Holy Spirit. He's the Holy One of Israel who is going to bring about the NC that Jeremiah and Ezekiel and all the prophets of old foretold. He will radically transform your life.

The beautiful thing about John's life is that he understood his mission. He understood that his whole goal was to point to someone greater than himself. To point to Jesus.

Isn't that our goal too? Not to increase our following, not to make our brand amazing, but to show people the way to Christ.

And I think John gives us the best example as he himself said: of Jesus: He must increase, I must decrease.

Pray