

The Forerunner of the Servant

Mark 1:1 *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

² *As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You."* ³ *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.' "* ⁴ *John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.* ⁵ *Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.* ⁶ *Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.* ⁷ *And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose."* ⁸ *"I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

"Coming soon" are words we often hear. We hear them on trailers or previews to films or movies. We hear them on reviews of cars about to be released. We hear them regarding a singer or pop star who is about to visit the country. Whether it is gadgets, TV shows, software or celebrities, we are bombarded with trailers, sneak previews, and advance reviews. We have all these because the companies that release them want the public to be prepared ahead of time for the release of this product or music or entertainment. They do not want to release whatever they have onto the market and have people be surprised or unaware of what it is. They want the best possible reception for their product or service, so they do a lot of work before it actually arrives.

The most important event in human history is the coming of the Son of God to earth. And just like all those marketers, God did not want such a momentous event to happen with the public unprepared. He did not want His Son to appear, and to have the general public ignorant of it, unaware, unprepared and too distracted to take notice.

God did a similar thing to all those previews and advance announcements we live with. Before Jesus Christ began His ministry, before He emerged from about thirty years of obscurity at His baptism, and began His public ministry, God sent an advance announcement. That announcement came in the form of the man we read of in verses 2 through 8 of Mark 1: John the Baptist. John – the last of the Old Testament prophets. John – the greatest man who has ever lived, according to Jesus Himself. John, a fascinating character, used by God to prepare the hearts of Israel for the ministry of Jesus Christ.

As we consider him from these verses, we'll see three aspects of this extraordinary man's life that enabled him to prepare hearts for Christ. As we do that, I want you to ask yourself the question: had I lived in this time, how would I have responded to John? How is my heart's attitude towards Christ?

I. The Promise and Purpose of the Forerunner

Mark 1:2 ² *As it is written in the Prophets: "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You."*

Mark 1:3 ³ *"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.' "*

This is the only time Mark himself quotes the Old Testament, and he quotes Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. John was not a self-appointed one-man religious side-show. John was promised and predicted hundreds of years before. God was saying to Israel, just before Messiah comes, look for the forerunner. He is the little green bud which shows you that the summer of Messiah is coming soon.

You might remember the record of John's birth in Luke 1. He was the son of the priest Zecharias,

and his wife Elisabeth, a childless couple who were told by the angel Gabriel that they would have a son, and he was to be called John. He was to be under the Nazarite vow:

Luke 1:15 ¹⁵ *"For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink."*

John no doubt lived with Zecharias and learnt the ways of a priest, until he was about thirty. Like the life of Jesus, after his birth, the Scriptures are silent about John. And then at thirty, he apparently leaves home, and begins his ministry. About six months before Jesus is baptised by him, he appears. Beginning near the Dead Sea, in the Judean wilderness, John travelled up the Jordan Rift, until he came to Bethany where Jesus came to be baptised by him.

What was he to do? Look again at verse 2 – he was to prepare Your way. Whose way? The way of Messiah. This is God the Father speaking prophetically to God the Son – I will send someone ahead of you. According to verse 3- He will make your paths straight. He will make things ready ahead of You.

Question: Why would Messiah need someone to make things ready for Him? Why would He need someone to go ahead, and clear the path, so to speak? In ancient times, a travelling King would often have a messenger sent ahead of him, who would do two things. He would repair the roads that the king would be travelling on, so that the king's arrival would not be a bumpy, uncomfortable one. Second, he would announce to the people of that place that the king was coming.

This is what John did. He went ahead of Jesus, to announce to the people that the King was coming. And John didn't repair physical roads, but he did work on the stoniness of the hearts of the people of Israel. His role was to shock the people out of their religious complacency and prepare them to meet Christ.

Luke 1:16-17 ¹⁶ *"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God."* ¹⁷ *"He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, 'to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,' and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

This was John's purpose. But what did he do? And how was it received?

II. The Practice and Popularity of the Forerunner

Mark 1:4 ⁴ *John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*

John came baptising. Baptism was not new to the Israelites, but the way John did it, and the meaning he put on it was new. If a Gentile wanted to convert to Judaism, one of the things he would have to do was self-immersion. He had to immerse – that's what baptise means – himself completely in water to symbolise ritual purification.

Here John comes, and he is baptising Jews! This would have been shocking to most people. Why would Jews, God's people need to be immersed? John told them, as recorded in Luke:

Luke 3:8 ⁸ *"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."*

John's message was simple – the kingdom is at hand, because the king is soon to arrive. But this king and his kingdom is one of righteousness and holiness. So repent! Turn away from your sins and your religious complacency. Prepare yourself to receive the Messiah. And then, if that is your heart, come and be baptised to show that you identify with this coming Messiah. In the middle of

this wicked and perverse generation who trust in their own righteousness, come and testify that you have turned from your sin and are awaiting this Messiah.

You can well ask, what would this have done to the established religious community? What would the Pharisees and Sadducees have thought of this man, who was essentially saying that most Israelites were not in a righteous relationship with God?

The same effect we find today in established religious circles, when someone comes along and asks, "Have you been born again? Have you recognised your sinfulness and turned from it and embraced Christ?" Such a person is often seen as an agitator, a trouble-maker, a fanatic, and extremist. We all like our religion in nice, civilised, moderation, thank you very much. We are all nice people, and we don't need some screaming preacher telling us to repent.

But apparently, that's what God thinks we need. Apparently, he sees those fine robes of respectability as filthy grave clothes, and sends a brutally honest message to tell us so. Apparently, our imagined refinement is a cloak for our self-righteousness, so God sends a rude messenger to strip off these things so we will see that we are wretched and poor and blind and naked without Christ. The healthy do not need a physician, but the sick. So God lovingly sends a brutally clear message to pierce through the sleep that will send us to hell, and show us our true state.

This was the practice of John the Baptist.

How was it received?

Mark 1:5 ⁵ Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

Amazingly, John's message was hugely popular. According to Mark, people from all over the country went out to him. There was a constant stream of people travelling to hear him, and many of them responded positively to his message – confessing their sins, being baptised by him. Why was there such a positive response to John's ministry?

The answer is, Israel was gripped by a fever of Messianic expectation. Israel was desperate for the Messiah, and there is a lot of evidence that at this particular time, around A.D. 30, Israel was filled with messianic expectation. How do we know? Well, many books were written between the end of the Old Testament and this time, and they are filled with the theme of the coming Messiah. Entire communities had begun, around the theme of Messiah, You may have heard of the Essenes, a group which secluded itself from mainstream Israel life, to live in purity and await Messiah. Furthermore, Israel had the prophecies of Daniel, and knew that the time was near for Messiah to appear. They knew they were living in the days of the fourth kingdom predicted by Daniel. And because of all this, there was a spate of false, pretender Messiahs.

So there was an atmosphere of readiness to consider the claims of anyone who spoke of Messiah. John's message was also popular because he was a genuine prophet. It had been a long time since a prophetic voice had been heard in Israel. For 400 years, Israel had not heard a prophet's voice, only the sound of scribes and their commentaries. Now suddenly, the piercing voice of a prophet, who makes a specific demand and accepts only real obedience, even from the spiritual leaders of Israel. Israel knew they were privileged to be hearing a true prophet, the first one in 400 years.

That's not to say that everyone who came to him was sincere. Many of the Pharisees came to him and he called them a brood of vipers. In John 1, the Sanhedrin sent him a committee to question

him. And we find out in Acts 19 that there were people who were baptised by John, but who had not believed in Christ and were not saved. John's baptism could not save. He was there to prepare. But to those who received John's message, they were ready for Christ.

In an era of cellphones, Twitter, Facebook, email, we are quickly bored. We crave novelty. We are too concerned about what is new, what is relevant and not enough concerned with what is permanent. In today's world, John may well have been today's news, and forgotten tomorrow. We can be very thankful that Christ came in a time when people were not hardened to news, when people would walk miles to see a prophet in the wilderness. We are very proud of our technology, but perhaps we are the generation most to be pitied – a generation so drowning in messages, that we can no longer sort out the important ones from the less important.

Has the saturation of information made you bored with the truth? Has the continual bombardment with messages made you blasé about John's message – repent, so that you can receive Messiah? We, too, need to have our hearts made ready. We, too, need to silence all other voices and know that this is not just another bit of information. The news about Jesus – the good news – the Gospel – is not just one more email, one more story in your RSS feed, one more post on the blogs you read. This is *the* story.

Do not take Jesus for granted. Do not become gospel-hardened. Listen to the last of the Old Testament prophets, as he says – repent, and come to Christ.

III. The Prophecy and Preaching of the Forerunner

Mark 1:6-8 ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. ⁸ "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptist was a prophet. His appearance was that of a prophet. Remember, he had grown up in a priest's home. He chose to wear camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist to identify himself with Elijah. Elijah wore the same kind of leather belt. His diet was the simple diet of the ascetic; someone who embraced hardship of lifestyle to accompany his message. Remember, he was also consecrated as a Nazarite.

When you go to see a man who has embraced a life of loneliness, difficulty, and hardship, how seriously do you take his message? This was John's purpose. When he preached, he preached with unbending conviction. He was not a reed shaken by the wind. He was a bold prophet, the very last of the Old Testament prophets. So much so, that people speculated whether he might not be the Messiah.

John 1:19-30 ¹⁹ Now this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the LORD," ' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴ Now those who were sent were from the Pharisees. ²⁵ And they asked him, saying, "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, saying, "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. ²⁷ "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." ²⁸ These things were done in Bethabara beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing. ²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! ³⁰ "This is He of whom I said, 'After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.'

Why did John emphasize his unworthiness? His ministry was all about someone else. His entire preaching was to point to Messiah, not to himself. He emphasised someone else's ministry:

John 3:26-36 ²⁶ And they came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified -- behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!" ²⁷ John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. ²⁸ "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' ²⁹ "He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. ³⁰ "He must increase, but I must decrease. ³¹ "He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. ³² "And what He has seen and heard, that He testifies; and no one receives His testimony. ³³ "He who has received His testimony has certified that God is true. ³⁴ "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God does not give the Spirit by measure. ³⁵ "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand. ³⁶ "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him."

This was John's testimony towards Jesus. But what did Jesus say about John?

Matthew 11:7-14 ⁷ As they departed, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ "But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ "For this is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' ¹¹ "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. ¹³ "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ "And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come."

And according to Jesus, in John the baptist was the greatest man that ever lived. If the greatest man that ever lived spent his ministry pointing to Christ, how important is Christ? What attention have you given to Him? Is your heart ready to receive Him, to welcome Him?

There is another One who today does a similar work to John the Baptist. He also does not testify of Himself, but He continually points to Jesus. He prepares hearts to receive Jesus, by convicting them of sin, righteousness and judgement. He is not a man dwelling in the desert, but the Holy Spirit. And like John, He still seeks to say, tune out all the other messages – this is the One you need to hear! Do not be captivated by what is new! For there is some very old news that is the best news of all. God has sent His Son into the world so that you can be reconciled to Him. Do not go on living life your own way. Do not go own living life for yourself. Do not go own trusting in your religion, or your spirituality, or your sense of your own goodness. Call your sin what it is. Turn away from it. Accept God's verdict on your life, and throw yourself at the mercy of Jesus. He is always merciful. He promised that whoever comes to me, I will not cast out.

John taught people to be ready for when Jesus came, so that when He came, they would receive Him. Jesus is coming again. But the second time He comes, there will be no time to make up your mind about Him. When He comes, He will come to judge the decisions already made.

So, are you like those Israelites who listened to John, repented and were baptised? Have you responded to that work of the Spirit calling to no longer resist Jesus Christ?