

“Into the Desert”

The Third in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 1:9-13; Deuteronomy 8:1-20

Something was brewing out in the wilderness of Judea. A strange man who looked like Elijah the prophet had appeared in the desert east of Jerusalem. People everywhere were flocking to see him. His preaching was powerful and he was baptizing people in the Jordan River. His message was simple, yet alarming—the time had come for Israel to repent of their sins. Maybe this really was the sign that God was about to speak once again after four-hundred years of silence. Could it be that this strange man was really was Elijah? But those who listened carefully to John’s preaching knew that his message was not about himself—it was about someone to come after him. Mark tells us that “*this was [John’s] message: ‘After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’*” That one whom John said would come after him . . . well, he has come, and his name is Jesus of Nazareth.

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark. We are working our way through the prologue (or introduction) to this gospel in which Mark gives his hearer/reader a sense of perspective on what is about to happen in the balance of the story. Having heard the first thirteen verses of Mark’s gospel, we know what the characters in the story—such as the disciples and religious leaders of Israel—do not know, and which they struggle to understand as Jesus begins his public ministry. Remember, most people in the first century could not read and so our gospels were written for the purpose of being read aloud in the churches. This is why it is so helpful to listen to the gospel as it is read aloud—something I encourage all of you to do at least once during this series.

In the prologue of Mark we learn of the coming of John the Baptist out in the Judean wilderness. We learn of John’s preaching of repentance and his baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We also learn that once John had come, Jesus of Nazareth too was ready to begin his long-anticipated messianic mission to the people of God. Every Jew who knew his Old Testament knew that if John the Baptist really was that Elijah figure foretold in the prophets who would come and prepare the way for the Lord, then the Messiah’s coming was right at the door. This explains why the buzz about what was going in the Judean desert was more than just idle curiosity. The character and location of John’s ministry were powerful indicators that Israel’s Messiah and the latter-day glory were about to be revealed.

The good news of Mark’s Gospel begins out in the wilderness of all places. John came as a new Elijah—his camel hair garment, leather belt and diet of locusts being the chief clue. John’s preaching summoned the entire nation of Israel to repentance, thereby in a symbolic sense leveled and prepared the way in the wilderness for Israel’s Messiah—the very thing that both Isaiah and Malachi had predicted would happen hundreds of years before John appeared in the desert. It is certainly not a coincidence that John begins his ministry as messianic herald out in the wilderness and baptizing in the Jordan River, two of the most significant places in Israel’s history. It was in the wilderness that God tested his people and gave them his law. As recounted in Joshua 3, the people of Israel had to cross through the Jordan River to enter the land of promise. John did not pick these two places by accident.

The very fact that John had appeared in the Judean wilderness meant that something was up. Every Jew knew it—and that is why the people of Israel eagerly flocked to see John and hear him preach. Even Josephus, the famous Jewish historian mentions John, his preaching and his baptism, as well as Herod’s

unfounded fear that John might lead an insurrection against him.¹ Therefore, John's summons to Israel and his baptism in the Jordan clearly meant that a new phase in redemptive history was about to begin. His message was foretold in the prophets and his baptism called to mind both Israel's crossing through the Red Sea on dry ground and the passage into Canaan through the Jordan River.

But if a new phase in redemptive history was beginning, this also meant that the old covenant era was rapidly drawing to a close. John comes as the last of the Old Testament prophets. He stands with one foot in the Old Covenant era and one in the New. In fact, John functions as God's covenant prosecutor. It is John's mission as the forerunner of the Messiah to give Israel one final chance to repent and turn to YHWH. For as the prophets also foretold, as soon as John appears in the Judean wilderness, so too the Messiah will appear. And when the Messiah comes, covenant curses and blessings will be dispensed. Then, it will be too late to repent. Therefore, even as John was bringing the Old Covenant to a close and heralding the arrival of the new, John was preaching about someone yet to come. John baptized in water, but Israel's long-expected Messiah will do something that John could never do—he (the Messiah) will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

And so with that, we turn to Mark's introduction of the key figure in his gospel—Jesus of Nazareth. As the balance of the prologue unfolds in verses 9-13, we learn three things which we need to know to make sense of all that follows. The first of these is John's declaration in verse 8 that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

The language of Mark 1:8 is important when John declares, "*I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" The contrast is clear—John baptizes in water, while the one coming after him baptizes with the Holy Spirit. The implication is that John's baptism is a temporary phenomenon, part of his mission as forerunner. The relationship between baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit is a rather prominent theme in the New Testament. Take, for example, Acts 1:5, when, immediately before his ascension into heaven, Jesus tells his disciples: "*For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.*" The implication is that however important baptism in water may be, Spirit baptism is far greater. John does the former, Jesus alone can do the latter.

In Acts 19:1-6, we read of people who knew of John's baptism, but had not heard of baptism in the Holy Spirit. In fact, they did not even know there was a Holy Spirit! There we read, "*while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*" There are a couple of things here worth noting.

For one thing, John's baptism is not Christian baptism, since John's followers needed to be rebaptized. It is also clear that these people mentioned in Acts 19 had not received the Holy Spirit—and needed to. The point seems to be that the baptism of John, as well as Christian baptism which replaces John's, is an initiatory rite which is not magically tied to the baptism of the Holy Spirit—that everyone baptized in

¹ Paul L. Maier, Josephus: The Essential Works (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1994), 271-272.

water is necessarily baptized by the Holy Spirit. This is one of the main points made in John 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit—who gives the new birth and entrance into the kingdom of God—blows where ever He wills. While all believers in the New Testament are to be baptized—the New Testament does not have a category for an unbaptized Christian, except for an exceptional case, such as the thief on the cross—baptism in water does not mechanically bring about the baptism in the Spirit.

Water is material and baptism in water is purely an external act. But the Holy Spirit can effect change at the fundamental level of human existence and create new life (regeneration) where only sin and death had held sway, prior to the Spirit's life-giving action. Closely related is the fact that the Holy Spirit is the herald of the age to come, just as John was the herald of the coming Messiah.² Therefore, when God's Spirit is poured out upon all flesh—as foretold by a number of Israel's prophets—human history enters its final phase. Mark's point is that water baptism is important as a sign of forgiveness, but that John's baptism in water is itself the sign that a greater baptism is about to come, a baptism which is the sign that God would be present with his people in ways which far transcend the reality of the Old Covenant. John's baptism means that someone great has come. He will do something much greater than John can do.³

This is an important point. Israel's prophets had foretold in a number of instances that one of the signs of the dawn of the messianic age would be that God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh—both Jew and Gentile. In Joel 2:28-32, which is one of the most famous of these prophecies, we read the following prophecy. *“And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved; for on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there will be deliverance, as the LORD has said, among the survivors whom the LORD calls.”* Peter cites this passage during the Pentecost Sermon and says it is fulfilled by the events of that day. As we have just seen in the citation from Acts 1:5, Jesus will make plain to his disciples that he is the one who baptizes in the Spirit. But in the prologue of Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist already knew this to be true even before Jesus began his public ministry. And now, so does Mark's reader.

There are a number of other such statements in the prophecy of Isaiah about the Spirit ushering in the messianic age, (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; 63:11-14). The point is that when John calls Israel into the wilderness to repent he does so with the expectation that what the prophet had expected was now a reality. The coming one, John says, will bring this to pass. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. In other words, the coming one will bring about the reality—baptism in the Holy Spirit—of which water baptism is but sign and seal. Mark implies that John clearly understood his role as forerunner. He called the people into the wilderness and his baptism was a sign of the messianic baptism in the Spirit, yet to come.⁴ Therefore, by opening his gospel with this account, Mark is recreating in those who hear this gospel the very same kind of decision faced by those who lived in Judea when John appeared out in the wilderness. It is not enough to know facts about John. Mark's hearer must believe that John was the forerunner of Jesus and that his

² See the helpful discussion in France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 71-73.

³ France, [The Gospel of Mark](#), 70-73.

⁴ Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 51-53.

call to Israel is a call to all those who hear this gospel.⁵ This sets the stage for everything to follow.

The second thing we learn about Jesus from the prologue of Mark's Gospel is that Jesus went out into the wilderness and submits to John's Baptism and is immediately commissioned by YHWH for his messianic mission, which begins immediately thereafter.

In verses 9-11, Mark introduces us to the main character in his proclamation of life-changing good news. *"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"* Mark packs a great deal into these three verses and we would be remiss if we didn't unpack them a bit.

Let's start with an apologetic and theological concern. Critical scholars often dismiss as historical episodes in the gospels such as this—choosing instead to consider them legendary. But why would anybody in the early church make this story up? That Jesus submits to John's baptism for the forgiveness of sin was very problematic for the early church, which claimed in its preaching, especially to Jews, that Jesus was sinless and that he perfectly obeyed the Law of Moses. But if Jesus was sinless, why would he need to be baptized by John, whose baptism was *for* the forgiveness of sins? The early church would have never just made up something which might have been, at first glance, embarrassing and contradictory to its preaching.⁶ No, this particular event clearly has the ring of truth about it.

The theological reason why Jesus submitted to John's baptism is to point out the huge contrast between the ministries of Jesus and John—continuing the theme we have just discussed when we contrasted their two baptisms. While Jesus submits to the baptism of John, he himself will baptize in a much more dramatic and powerful way. While Jesus alone can create spiritual life, he now willingly takes upon himself the sign of repentance—not for himself, but for those he will baptize in the Holy Spirit. As one writer puts it, "In submitting to John's baptism Jesus acknowledges the judgment of God upon Israel. At the same time his baptism signifies that his mission will be to endure the judgment of God. Jesus comes to John as the true Israelite whose repentance is perfect."⁷ Here, we find our first hint that Jesus is the obedient Son of God, who will create a new Israel, because he himself is the true Israel. Jesus will do what Israel failed to do. Jesus does not grumble nor complain. He willingly submits to all of God's demands. His never doubts that his father will keep his promises.

Another thing to consider are the dramatic redemptive-historic implications which grow out of Mark's contrast between Jesus and John (especially the contrast between v. 5 and v. 9). It is vital to note that once John began his work as forerunner out in the wilderness of Judea, east of Jerusalem, Jesus likewise went out from his home in Nazareth to find John. John did not call for Jesus—"OK, I am the forerunner. Where's the Messiah?" No, Jesus came to John willingly and humbly. From Mark's account it is certainly implied that when once John's mission as messianic forerunner had begun in the desert, so too, it was time for our Lord to begin his own public ministry. And where does Jesus begin that ministry? Not in Jerusalem. Not in the temple. But Jesus begins out in the wilderness (or desert), where John

⁵ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 53.

⁶ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 51.

⁷ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 54.

began to preach. That Jesus self-consciously goes out into the wilderness, the very place where Israel was tested by God and repeatedly failed that test is an important key in understanding his entire messianic ministry. It is here in the wilderness, of all places, that Jesus humbly submits to John's baptism, even though he himself has no sins from which to repent. True Israel has come. A new Israel will be formed and a new Exodus is soon to begin.

As I mentioned, the parallels between verse 5 and verse 9 of Mark's prologue are quite striking. In verse 5, we hear of those great multitudes of Jews who went out to John, while in verse 9, Mark says Jesus came from Nazareth alone. The people came from the Judean countryside and Jerusalem, while Jesus came from Nazareth. The people came to be baptized, just as Jesus came to be baptized. But while the people confessed their sins, Jesus did not. He had no sins to confess. Jerusalem was the heart of Jewish life. Nazareth, on the other hand, was a backwater town, where people were largely indifferent to the Law. In verse 5, we read of how multitudes of people came to be baptized, and then in verse 9, we read of one person who came to be baptized as the representative of all the others. Jesus is not some isolated individual who happens to be more righteous than everyone else. Rather, Jesus is the one who is perfectly righteous and yet who willingly identifies himself with the unrighteous. By being baptized by John in the desert and in the Jordan River, Jesus is self-consciously identifying with God's people in the wilderness. The one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit, is also willing to receive a baptism of repentance, when he himself has no reason to repent.⁸ In this act, Jesus begins to identify himself as true Israel, who has come to create a new Israel, to begin a new Exodus, to an even greater land of promise.

The language used in verse 10 in reference to Jesus' baptism is also striking—but unfortunately flattened out in the NIV. That Jesus was truly submissive to his Father's will is demonstrated by the fact that “immediately” upon Jesus coming up out of the water, we read that the heavens were torn open and that the Holy Spirit came down from above. Sadly, the word “immediately” (*euthus*) is omitted in the NIV, so we lose a sense of the connection between the two events. Jesus' baptism is directly connected to the tearing open of the heavens and his reception of the Holy Spirit. The point is that even as Jesus humbly submits to John, immediately he is commissioned as that one for whom John had been preparing.⁹

When Mark tells us that heaven is torn open—he is speaking of a dramatic vision. This is the same language used in Ezekiel 1:1, as the prophet stands beside a river only to have the heavens “torn” open so me might receive a vision from God. It is only then, that Ezekiel is commissioned for his task of preaching to Israel. That same kind of thing is in view here. This is also the language of Isaiah 64:1—“*Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!*” Anyone familiar with the Old Testament would have quickly made this connection between Isaiah's prophecy and its fulfillment when Jesus is commissioned. Furthermore, this has profound echoes from the account of the Exodus, as in those instances when God would come down from heaven, only after the people had been consecrated (Exodus 19:10 ff). What is not yet obvious to Mark's reader/hearer is that Mark will use this same word again in Mark 15:38—“*the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.*” When Jesus identifies himself with his people, vicariously receiving a baptism for the forgiveness of sin on behalf of his people, at that very moment, heaven is torn open. In

⁸ See the discussion of this in: Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 55. France sees this as a bit of wishful thinking (76), but it is rather striking and well-worth pointing out.

⁹ France, The Gospel of Mark, 76.

this instance, two dramatic things happen, immediately.¹⁰

The first thing is that the Spirit comes down from heaven to equip Jesus for his messianic ministry. This event fulfills a number of messianic prophecies, such as Isaiah 11:2 when Isaiah says of the coming Messiah—“*The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD,*” but also Isaiah 42:1, where YHWH says of his servant—“*Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.*” That the Spirit comes down from heaven upon Jesus clearly indicates that Jesus is the Messiah because he is the anointed one. In fact, Jesus’ public ministry cannot begin *until* Jesus receives the Spirit. But once Jesus has received the Spirit, he can no longer remain out of the public eye. Jesus must be about his Father’s business.

Our Lord’s reception of the Spirit, which in the vision took the form of a dove coming down (which calls to mind the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the deep at the time of creation—Genesis 1:2), was accompanied by a second thing—God’s voice from heaven blessing his beloved son, Jesus. That this is a cosmic sign is obvious—and there are hints at a new creation in these words. Echoing the words of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, Jesus is now declared to be God’s son and obedient servant, by none other than the Father himself. There are a number of important things going on in this declaration. We see this in our Old Testament Lesson this morning, when we read of Israel’s time of testing in the desert as recounted in a passage such as Deuteronomy 8:1-20.

Furthermore, several of Israel’s prophets (Jeremiah 2:2 and Hosea 11:1-3) spoke of Israel in the wilderness as the “son of God,” and both prophets foretold of a time when God would renew Israel’s sonship out in the wilderness. Thus, when Jesus goes out into the wilderness and submits to John’s baptism, he not only receives the Spirit, he is declared to be God’s true son because Jesus has just made the true and perfect exodus. He has done the very thing Moses commanded Israel to do in passages such as Deuteronomy 8, but which Israel failed to do. The obedient son has gone out into the wilderness to submit to his father.¹¹ When he does, a new exodus begins and there are strong hints that a new creation is underway. And all of this centers upon Jesus’ obedience.

Thus the Father himself says of Jesus, “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*” Jesus does not become the son at his baptism. Rather, the Father himself proclaims what has always been true of the son. Jesus is clearly the true Israel. His summons to believe in him is a call to a new Exodus. In him, the new creation is already underway. The baptism of Jesus by John and his reception of the Spirit along with the divine benediction, then, is a major turning point in the redemptive drama. God’s blessing upon Jesus sets the stage for everything which follows in Mark’s proclamation of good news about Jesus!

The third thing we learn, is that after immediately being baptized by John and receiving his messianic commission from the Father, Jesus went into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil.

As Mark puts it in verses 12-13, “*At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.*” Mark’s

¹⁰ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 56.

¹¹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 56.

account is much briefer than the reports of this in Matthew and Luke. Mark simply tells us that it was the Spirit who immediately drove Jesus even deeper into the desert after his baptism and commissioning. The echoes from the Exodus are loud and clear. Jesus was tempted in the desert by Satan for forty days, just as Israel had wandered in the wilderness for forty-years. Moses had been up on Mount Sinai for 40 days (Exodus 24:18). Elijah was likewise in the wilderness for forty days and nights (1 Kings 19:8), and angels ministered to Jesus, just as they had done with Elijah. Like Israel, Jesus is the beloved Son of God and is now commissioned and equipped for his messianic ministry. And as soon as that ministry begins, Jesus must endure the same test that both Adam and Israel endured, yet failed.

Returning to the theme of a new creation, Jesus must do spiritual conflict with the devil—the implication is that a cosmic battle is being waged out in the desert.¹² When Mark mentions that animals are present with our Lord, we have echoes from the account of Eden (Genesis 2-3), implying that Jesus is the second Adam (and Lord of creation) who will resist the kind of temptation which worked so well when Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the Garden. And yet, Mark doesn't say a word about Jesus's victory over the devil—even though such a victory is certainly implied by the fact that once Jesus returns from this forty days in the wilderness he begins his public ministry in verses 14 and 15 by calling disciples and preaching about the kingdom of God.

Thus as the true Israel, Jesus is both affirmed and sustained in the wilderness.¹³ He is also obedient in the wilderness. But even before his ministry begins, Satan tried to stop him, and Jesus emerges victorious and begins to preach about the kingdom. He is the true Israel. He is obedient son and suffering servant. Jesus went out into the desert to do what had not yet been done—to render perfect obedience to God's law and to fulfill all righteousness. And so even before Jesus begins to preach, we know that he is the Son of God, loved by the father, the true Israel, the humble servant and the victor over Satan. We know that in this man, a new creation is beginning to dawn.

If he were not all of these things we'd still be in our sins. But because he willingly identified with his people when he himself had no sin, we stand forgiven. Because the Father himself pronounces a divine benediction upon Jesus, we must listen to what he says. We must believe what he teaches us. And we must do as he commands us. For he is the true Israel. He leads us in a new Exodus. He begins the new creation. And he alone baptizes in the Spirit. This then, is why our blessed Jesus went out into the desert.

¹² Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 60-61.

¹³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 62.