

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Mark		Pastor/Teacher
Text	Mark 1:1-13		Mason Depew
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### THE WAY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

1. Try to imagine living as a Jew after the Exile. It was a time of constant turmoil for the people of God, trading one foreign master for another and rarely being allowed to live freely or peacefully at all, even for those in the land of Israel. For those living in diaspora communities, spread throughout numerous nations and empires, it would be *even more difficult* to hold on to hope and remain a faithful Jew. No other people in ancient times managed to maintain their own religion, culture, and language while living among hostile foreign nations for so long.
  - a. Just think of how many Christians today are panicked or despairing about the loss of Christian influence over our culture. They typically look back to some time in the past century, but at the coming of Christ, the Jews have not really been “on top” for centuries! Meanwhile they live among cultures that practice open infanticide and pederasty while worshiping countless false gods and local spirits.
  - b. But many Jews *did* hang on by clinging to promises from their prophets, like this quotation from Isaiah about the Lord coming through the wilderness as an unstoppable force to save his people.<sup>1</sup> And this is why Mark’s Gospel begins by announcing that this is the *gospel*, that is “good news,” of Jesus Christ. The good news is that God is keeping his promises! All the prophecies are coming true in Christ.
  - c. Devout Jews who knew Isaiah well would also remember the verses that follow Mark’s quotation, which add even more color to the vivid picture of God’s salvation. For many of us it’s hard to read these verses without thinking of Handel’s melody: “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.” The point is there is no obstacle that can stand between God and his people! He created everything originally, and he will remake the world if it stands in his way.
  - d. This background also helps us understand why the Jews so badly *misunderstood* the nature of Jesus’s mission. They were desperately seeking a champion to fight their most *obvious* enemy, the foreigners who were oppressing them, rather than the real cause of their situation, which is the curse of God on their sin.
    - i. This is a major theme of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus doesn’t *seem* like the glorious warrior king that they wanted, but Mark shows us in all kinds of subtle ways that Christ *is that powerful*; his power is just aimed at different targets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Careful readers will notice that Mark is not just quoting from Isaiah here. He is combining this quote with another verse from Malachi 3:1, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.” What is interesting about this context is it also contains a warning of judgment against sin, reminding us that God saves his people through judgment, not besides it.

<sup>2</sup> Notice how John says Jesus is “mightier than I” in verse 7. Mark portrays Jesus as overwhelmingly powerful, which makes the crucifixion all the more shocking at the end of the book. Mark presses first-time listeners/readers to ask, “Why would the all-powerful Son of God let this happen to himself?”

- ii. Mark foreshadows one of these targets by including John's statement that he baptizes with water, but Christ will baptize with the Holy Spirit. What does this mean? First of all it indicates that Christian baptism is distinct from John's baptism, in that it carries more power. But more specifically, it means that Christ is going to send the Spirit to change human hearts. His primary goal is not to overthrow Roman rule over his people, but to overthrow sin's rule over his people's hearts.<sup>3</sup> That is their most fundamental problem. Without dealing with sin, they would just rebel and go right back into exile again.
  - e. One of my professors told us it is a good idea to sit and listen to Mark's Gospel all at once. He thinks it was intentionally written to be heard this way, as a kind of first introduction to Jesus's life and mission that leaves you hanging, with more questions. If you do sit and listen to Mark all in one sitting, this is one of the main themes you will notice: nobody really understands what Jesus has come to do.
  - f. It is fitting, therefore, that the Messiah coming on such a strange mission should also have a strange herald, and this of course is John the Baptist. A wild man who seems unfit for civilized living.<sup>4</sup>
2. The prophecy from Isaiah describes John as a herald of the Lord himself, announcing he has come to deliver his people. But why would a great king send his herald to announce his coming *in the wilderness*? Most people live in the cities and villages, not the desert, after all. Crying out about the king in the wilderness seems like a waste of time and effort.
- a. The answer comes when we remember what the wilderness represents throughout Scripture. The point is that it is not a place where people settle down and enjoy life (at least not before air conditioning has been invented). It is a place you have to make it *through* in order to get to where you really want to go. Most famously, the Exodus generation was tested by God in the wilderness and failed to pass, so they never made it out to the other side.
  - b. The Jews are in the wilderness, spiritually speaking. They are still living under the curses of Deuteronomy 28:15-68 for their ancestors' disobedience.<sup>5</sup> They are being tested to see whether their hearts really have returned to their Lord, and their greatest test, of whether they will embrace God's Messiah, is about to come. So John calls the Jews out to meet with him in the wilderness as a way of making their spiritual situation clearer, more concrete. Are they truly ready for what the Lord is about to do? Will they pass the test?
  - c. In preparation for this, John baptizes people to emphasize that their sin is like filth before God. Their sins are the reason for their exile and oppression, so they must be washed if they are to enjoy his blessings. When you are surrounded by sin and misery, it becomes easy to think these things are normal, or that this is all there is. The essence of John's ministry is to shake people awake who have gotten too used to exile.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a fulfillment of the prophecy by Ezekiel: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." - Ezekiel 36:26-27. John is saying Jesus will make this great promise come true!

<sup>4</sup> "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." - Mark 1:6-8

<sup>5</sup> For example, "And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. Your life shall hang in doubt before you. Night and day you shall be in dread and have no assurance of your life." - Deuteronomy 28:64-66. Compare this with the lament in Nehemiah 9:36-37, "Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress."

- d. This teaches us that only those who *know their sin* and see that they need to repent will receive forgiveness in Christ. You will not take the cure if you do not believe you have the disease! So John prepares the way of the Lord by warning them they are not ready for him.
3. Pay careful attention to how Jesus Christ is introduced here in Mark's Gospel. Some will say that John, the fourth and last Gospel, is the only one that comes close to claiming Jesus is divine, but this is not true!
    - a. In verse 1, Christ is called "the Son of God." By itself, this could mean that he is simply one whom God loves in an extraordinary way, as God had promised for David's heir.<sup>6</sup> But Mark follows this title up with the quotation from Isaiah 40, which prophesies that *the Lord himself*, not just David's heir, is coming. The obvious fulfillment of this, as you follow the story, is that John is the one preparing the way, and therefore that Jesus is *the Lord himself*.<sup>7</sup> If this was not his intent, a devout Jew like Mark surely would have clarified the connection he was drawing. To carelessly imply a mere man is the Holy One of Israel would be the height of blasphemy in any other situation.
    - b. This, of course, is confirmed still further by God's miraculous self-revelation at Jesus's baptism. Both the Father and the Spirit overtly confirm and set their seal, as it were, on Jesus's public ministry here. The Spirit by resting on him in the form of a dove,<sup>8</sup> and the Father by expressing his love and pleasure in the Son.<sup>9</sup>
  4. In our final two verses this morning, Jesus is driven out into the wilderness by the Spirit. We see here Mark's trademark "speed" as a narrator here, when he emphasizes that this was *immediately* after Jesus's baptism. Does this disrupt the beautiful picture of harmony between the members of the Trinity that we just saw? Why would God, being pleased with his Son, immediately inflict what seems like a punishment on him?
    - a. As we have already seen, the wilderness is a place of testing and trials. The Spirit drives Christ out into the wilderness because this is a key part of his mission: he is not here to settle down and have an easy life. He must endure intense sufferings and temptations to redeem his people.<sup>10</sup>
    - b. Mark does not recount exactly how Satan tempted Christ here. Like with many things, he appears to expect you can find answers to those questions in the other Gospels. But he

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<sup>6</sup> "I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me.[fn] Your throne shall be established forever." - 2 Samuel 7:14-16

<sup>7</sup> In the Hebrew of Isaiah 40:3, the prophet uses the personal name of God, "Yahweh." So the connection is unmistakable if you are taking the text seriously: Mark is saying that Jesus is Yahweh.

<sup>8</sup> Calvin sees in the dove the fulfillment of Isaiah 61:1, and therefore a clear sign of Christ's free offer of the Gospel: "On account of this mildness of Christ, by which he kindly and gently called, and every day invites, sinners to the hope of salvation, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the appearance of a dove And in this symbol has been held out to us an eminent token of the sweetest consolation, that we may not fear to approach to Christ, who meets us, not in the formidable power of the Spirit, but clothed with gentle and lovely grace." - Calvin's commentary on Mark 1:10.

<sup>9</sup> The word for "pleased" here does not refer, of course, to sensual or vulgar pleasures. It refers instead to a kind of wholesome satisfaction, being totally content with something or someone. In this case, therefore, the Father is saying that the Father has no problem with the Son on any level whatsoever. More than that, the Father and Son are completely united in character, divine attributes, and will. There is perfect harmony between them, so that if you see or hear Jesus Christ, that is as good as if you have beheld the Father himself. See also John 14:8-11.

<sup>10</sup> When Mark mentions "wild animals" in verse 13, he is not talking about squirrels. The Greek word here is typically used to describe large, intimidating beasts or dangerous predators, like the viper that bit the Apostle Paul in Acts 28:4-5. Mark includes this detail as a part of his larger theme that Christ has absolute power over the creation. Even the nastiest creatures cannot touch him.

clearly felt he had to mention it at least briefly, because it again shows us who the true enemy is.

- c. It is so easy for us, like the Jews, to become fixated on *the unbelieving world*, and think that is the biggest threat to us. If we get tunnel vision, however, we will overlook and be outflanked by our other two enemies: the flesh and the devil! It is not really the Romans who had the Jews in bondage at the time of Christ, and it is not any kind of grand conspiracy of bankers and elites in our day. It is *sin* and the curse of the Fall, above all else, that the devil uses to hold us in bondage and at enmity with God. Christ came to shatter the bonds of that slavery, and move every mountain and valley that was in his way, to do it! So his mission is aimed at all three targets, each much larger than the particular problems that face us from day to day. He is not attacking the poison fruit directly, but rather at the roots of the poisonous tree.
- d. That is what we will see throughout the rest of this series on the Gospel of Mark: Jesus Christ has overwhelming, absolutely unmatched power to save you. But he will not save you *on your terms*. You cannot manipulate him and point him at whatever you want to destroy. You must come to him *on his terms*, recognizing that he is the Lord of all creation and fully sovereign over your salvation. When you do, you will find him gentle, peaceful like a dove, and pleased in you because he has paid for your sins and covered you in his righteousness.
- e. In the time between his first and second comings, the Church lives in a time of testing and trials much like John and Jesus did. This is the point of the last portion of Revelation 12, when the dragon attacks the woman who represents the Church, but the Lord shields her in the wilderness.<sup>11</sup> The great difference between Christ's temptations in the wilderness and ours is that he has gone before us and encompasses us all around with provision and protection. If you truly walk your path in this life by faith in Jesus Christ, you may be at times bruised, frustrated, disappointed, and aggrieved, but never forsaken. He will preserve you through the wilderness and bring you out on the other side, into everlasting rest and true peace.

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<sup>11</sup> "And when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle so that she might fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to the place where she is to be nourished for a time, and times, and half a time. The serpent poured water like a river out of his mouth after the woman, to sweep her away with a flood. But the earth came to the help of the woman, and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth. Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus. And he stood on the sand of the sea." - Revelation 12:13-17