

Clearing the Way

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[0 : 0 0] As we began our time in Mark, we studied Mark the man. He was not perfect by any means, a deserter, one that left Paul! Paul on the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas, and he was a quitter. He then got it right. He hung out with the right people and was used as a helper and a friend and a writer in a mighty way. Today we look at the first few verses of this gospel that he wrote and we see Mark's beginning is introducing us to someone else. And I want us to spend some time on him this morning. Mark chapter 1, beginning in verse 1, says, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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 your paths straight. John appeared baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached saying, after me comes he who is mightier than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and tie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Well, that first verse, as we mentioned a couple of weeks ago, begins with the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

What Mark is saying is, as he writes in the first century in Rome, he's saying, I want you to, you've seen what God's doing. You've seen how lives are being changed as they profess their faith in Christ. I want you to know what Christ was like. I want you to know what he did. And he goes on to write a gospel, sharing that story of Jesus with us, primarily, probably that Peter told him, because Mark was so young, when Jesus' ministry was going on. He begins not with the genealogy of Jesus, as Matthew and Luke does. He does not begin with the birth of Jesus, as the other gospels do. He does not begin with the childhood visit to the temple of Jesus. He begins with his baptism and a description of the one who baptized him. He was baptized by a man named John the Baptist, our very first

Southern Baptist, right there in Scripture. He's actually not called Baptist until later in Scripture, but he's known most by this event, as well as the multiple baptisms that he did over those years. Scripture's clear that before the Messiah, the Christ, would come, there'd be an Elijah-type figure that would be leading the way. And Mark here mentions the prophet Isaiah and what Isaiah said. He actually references two prophets when he uses this passage. One is Malachi and one is Isaiah. In your Bible, verse 2 is actually Malachi chapter 3 verse 1 or comes from that. And verse 3 actually comes from Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3. However, Isaiah was a much more well-known prophet. His book's a lot longer.

He's written a lot more. He's written a lot more. And he was much more well-known. The people of Rome would have known him about Isaiah, even though many were Gentiles. Malachi, not so much. They probably wouldn't have known him. And citing one of them, but quoting from both of them is not odd when you combine a quote together. You see that in Scripture quite a bit.

[4 : 2 3] The point is that John the Baptist was expected to lead the way for the Lord. It was prophesied that way.

It was also prophesied what he would do. His job was to prepare the way of the Lord. It is a military term. It speaks of roads that often were not well-maintained and needed to be fixed before royalty came through. They had bridges that might just collapse out of nowhere.

Before royalty was to arrive, those things were to be sured up. All of it was to be checked. All of it was to be made right as needed. If the ground needed to be leveled, level the ground. If barriers need to be moved, they were moved. If roads need to be straightened, they were straightened. It reminds me of when Donald Trump came to town. Now don't panic. It's not political. I'm just telling you the facts. There were three possible places on Main Street that his stage would be placed, and the city had an idea where they wanted it to be.

The Trump team had an idea where they wanted it to be. And Secret Service was here to check on anything that they came up with. One of the places that they considered was immediately eliminated because they were afraid of proper clearance of a building that I thought was a long way away. We were part of that discussion because it would affect First Baptist Church depending on where that stage was, and the fellowship hall was actually used as a cooling station. If you remember when he came, it was very hot that day before the storm came through, and it was very hot, and we had several people who needed assistance, and they went to the fellowship hall as a cooling station. However, before the president ever arrived, I promise you his route was planned. His route was planned out. If there was a problem with that route, they had an alternative route, they planned where to put people. They planned where people could park.

They planned where law enforcement were to be placed. It was all planned out before the president ever got here. They prepared the way. It was not about the city. It was not about Secret Service.

[7 : 02] It was not about the Trump team. It was about getting the president, at that time the future president, where he needed to be and when he needed to be there, and he would take care of the program.

They were just to prep the way and let the focus be on him. Now, I'm telling you, being able to watch it was impressive, and we found out months later in another state in the Union why you needed to make sure that you had proper preparations because bad things can happen if they don't, but it serves as a parallel because John's role was described by prophecy to lay down the groundwork, to prepare the way for the Lord and then get out of the way. He came baptizing. He stated it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. How better to prepare folks for the coming of the Lord than to encourage them to repent, to prepare their hearts. It was not a rare practice for Gentiles that came to Judaism to be baptized. That sometimes happened. However, for Jews, they were not known to be baptized. It was radical to ask them to be baptized, and yet John came calling out everybody, including the religious leaders, maybe especially the religious leaders, calling them a brood of vipers and speaking of their need of baptism.

Paul describes it like this in Acts 9, 19 verse 4. He said, John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is Jesus. Now, don't let this confuse you much because remember, this was before the coming of the Lord that John was doing all this baptism, and he was doing it in preparation for the Lord coming. Sadly, many of those that he baptized, many of those that were John's disciples failed to hear the whole story, at least on occasion, and these needed to be baptized again when they actually met the Lord, came to the Lord, and received Christ.

But this is a unique situation with John the Baptist because it was all before Christ came. It was simply preparation. However, what a job he did. The turnout was absolutely amazing. Jerusalem came out.

The country of Judea came out. Those who lived outside of Jerusalem, they all came out. It says all came, and that means it was a bunch of folks. It does not mean that every individual person possibly came there. They may have, but what it means is, just think, if we had a big event, and you were speaking with somebody who was not able to be at that event, and they asked you, well, who came? And you said, man, everybody came. Well, everybody didn't come because the one you're talking to didn't come, you know. But at the same time, everybody probably was not there, but it was a bunch of people, floods of people, estimated to be as many as 300,000 that came. They were listening. They were responding.

[10 : 31] God used him mightily. And you may wonder how and why. John the Baptist was very unique. He was great, and the other Gospels point out a lot more about him than Mark does because Mark writes in a hurry.

Luke tells us that he was supernaturally born to elderly parents. He was uniquely filled with the Holy Spirit in his mother's womb. He was born with a calling and a mission. John records what Jesus says about him in John chapter 5 verse 31 when he said, if I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true. There is another who bears witness about me, and I know that the testimony that he bears about me is true. You sent to John, and he has borne witness to the truth. Now, when Jesus says, if I alone bear witness about myself, my testimony is not true, what he's speaking to is a cultural understanding, and that was something that was not validated as truth unless there was more than one witness. There had to be at least two witnesses. So Jesus is saying, there's a need of two witnesses, and John the Baptist is the other witness for me. John was key to the launch of the ministry of Christ.

Jesus described him as the Elijah who is to come. Now, John was too humble and a little too overwhelmed by the spot that he was put in to really realize his significance. In John chapter 1, he of course denies that he's Christ when some people confuse that. He also denies that he's Elijah. He also denies that he's a prophet. He simply states in John 1 verse 23, I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord as the prophet Isaiah said. He was more of an Elijah type figure than he ever realized. He never really understood the significance of who he was. And Jesus said about him in Matthew 11 verse 11, truly I say to you, among those born of women, there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist. God used him mightily. But he was different. He was different. He lived in the wilderness. Now, I grew up in South Carolina, and I always thought the wilderness was the woods.

I grew up stomping through the woods, making trails through the woods, bike trails through the woods, trying to build tree houses and all that kind of thing. However, in Israel, the wilderness is not the woods. The wilderness is the desert. And it's hot in the day, and it's cool at night, and there's little vegetation, and there's few water sources, and I'll just tell you, it's hard living. If you add to that the wild animals and the dark nights, it's tough. The flats are often surrounded by sheer cliffs that are porous and cavernous, and there are a lot of places to get out of the weather, and there's a lot of places to hide, and a lot of people spent their time hiding in those caves. The land was full of bandits and robbers along the road. When Jesus talked about the man being robbed on the road to Jericho, I've seen one of those paths. I was riding from Jerusalem to Jericho on a bus, and I looked out the left window and noticed on the side of the road there was a path, a rough cliffside path that was leading from

Jerusalem to Jericho. And I couldn't help but think, I wonder if that's the road that Jesus was talking about. I have no idea, but I thought how easy it would be in such circumstances for somebody to be attacked, for somebody to be robbed, for somebody to lose their life. It could very easily happen, and I will tell you it did happen often. It was rugged, it was barren, it was arid, and somewhat forbidding. Nothing about living in the desert was desirable, and John's clothes was not desirable either.

[15 : 06] He wore a camel hair coat, but it was not from Brooks Brothers. It was the hide of a camel, not a smoking jacket, no velvet elbow pads, patches. It was rough, water resistant, and warm from the cold, but it was rough. Scripture tells us he also wore a leather belt, and it's very possible that that leather belt was actually a leather girdle. So John was wearing an untanned, rough piece of leather to gird himself with. I'll just say that was the greatest of discomfort. For a standard girdle for a man would be made of linen. The point is that John was living practically. John was living simply, but he was also living symbolically. For 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 8, we find that Elijah wore such a coat, and Elijah wore such a belt. It says he wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist.

Zechariah 13 verse 4 identifies a, quote, hairy coat as a sign of a prophet, and some believe that when Christ speaks of wolves in sheep's clothing in Matthew chapter 7, that he's actually taking off on what prophets often wore, and what they look like, and how somebody may try to look like a prophet, and not really be one. We know that what he meant was there's false prophets. We're not sure if he was talking about a particular clothing, but the clothing was a sign, and John wore it. Not only that, but it says he ate locusts and wild honey. That was practical in the desert, because there were locusts, and there was wild honey, and you ate what you found. He lived off the land. Now part of all of this was choices that he made to live a nomadic simple life. He purposely lived without the luxuries of society. He did not have a cell phone. He did not have a car. He did without those things. He came preaching repentance, baptizing people with a baptism of repentance, and as they turned from the sin of their heart, they would be clean. And that's what's shown in the imagery of his baptism. Jesus came to him and was baptized himself. To be clear, Jesus didn't repent, didn't need to repent to fulfill righteousness, but instead he said, I'm baptized to fulfill righteousness. I believe he did it to meet us where we are, to show us that we are to do it. I believe he did it for the powerful affirmation that he received from heaven as he came up out of the water. But I want to be clear about this, because as I can be, John was not baptizing with believers' baptism. He was baptizing to prepare people to meet

Christ and to then be saved. Acts chapter 19 shows us that some that were baptized by John, they're called John's disciples, needed to be baptized later when they realized that Christ had in fact come. John's ministry was cut off from those that he was discipling. And some of them never heard the rest of the story. Not all of them witnessed the coming of Christ. Not all of them witnessed the baptism of Christ. And there's a point of clarification that comes in Acts chapter 19 because some of them did not know Christ had come. Well, why didn't they know that? They didn't know that because John was executed. Why was he executed? He was executed due to Herod. But we need to get our Herod straight because one Herod was reigning when Jesus was born. And I don't know how to put this, but to say it, the man was crazy. He, I had the opportunity several years ago to visit his desert retreat that he was building for the last 24 years of his life. It stands on top of a high cliff over the Dead Sea.

And at that retreat, he was building three palaces for three of his wives. However, he was known to throw unsuccessful soldiers, untrusting servants, and dissatisfying wives off a cliff, off that cliff. It was his favorite way of killing. I remember when I was up there, I looked out a window of one of those structures. And when I looked out that opening, it was right on the edge of the cliff. And I was wondering, is this where he threw her out? Because he did. Now, can you imagine, because he did, he threw his wife out the window. Can you imagine what those wives must have thought living in a palace built just for them, right on top of a cliff with a crazy man there?

Psychiatrists tell us that he was probably a paranoid schizophrenic, which is a dangerous problem if it's unmedicated. And he died in 4 AD. Now, I don't know if his son was psychotic, but I know he was a sinner.

[21 : 05] And I know he married an unstable woman. He had taken her from his brother. And John was preaching strong at the time. He gained a lot of attention. Large crowds went out into the desert to see him.

They were coming from here and yonder, and he was gaining too much attention. And I'm telling you, John preached fire and brimstone. A lot of you'd be offended by him. He was bold and brassy. He called sin, sin. And when he preached against the adultery of Herod, his adulteress grew angry about it.

She didn't like it. And so at his birthday party, she had her daughter come out and do a provocative dance for him. And it excited him. And Herod promised her anything she wanted. He sounded like a drunk, rich, rich, redneck, is what he sounded like. And her mother said, tell him you want John's head. Well, he didn't want to do it. He was somewhat fascinated with John. He wanted to hear John. But he was a prideful man. He was weak. And excuse me, he was stupid. And she got it, what she wanted, literally on a platter. He was lustful. He was weak. And John died early because of it. He was a unique man.

But more than anything else, I want you to see two things that he was devoted to. First, he came to clear the way of the Lord. Let nothing hinder the coming of the king. Go before his arrival.

Take care of all the details. Let him come do what he's meant to do. He didn't do that by telling people, excuse me, he did that by telling people to repent. He did that by giving them a baptism of repentance to make their hearts as ready as possible for the Spirit of God to do the task through the message and the person of Jesus. And the second thing he came to do is give Christ all the glory. People came all around to see John. And they had to work hard to get there. Scripture tells us Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John. That's roughly 70 miles that he walked. And because of the terrain, that's a 10 to 14 day trip on average for somebody of that era. Jerusalem was not that far, but it was still a long way away. And they came out of Jerusalem and all Judea to come see him. It took effort. He was something to see. He was something to hear. But do you know what they heard? Verse seven and eight, I'll repeat. After me, he said, comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit. Now you probably know that due to the nature of the walks that they took because of the sandals that they wore, that washing feet was the lowest job of the servant of a household. Matter of fact, some didn't even want their servants to wash their feet. They wanted to find somebody else outside the home. But John wasn't bothered by that. John was basically saying the ritual that I do with baptism is nothing compared to the life changing baptism of the spirit of God. When Christ regenerates hearts, he said in John chapter three, 28 through 30, he said, I am not the Christ, but I've been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom who stands and hears him rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore, this joy of mine is now complete. Have you ever had a friend that was just happy for you when you were happy? They just wanted you taken care of and they got more joy over you being taken care of than they did themselves. I'm telling you, that's a friend to have. That's somebody special. That's the way John the Baptist was for Jesus. And then he goes on to say this. He says, he must increase and I must decrease. What a powerful testimony. Christian, that is exactly what we are to do. We are to clear the way for Christ to move in other people's lives. Now, how do we do that? I want to give you four ways to do that quickly. And I don't want you to choose one of them. I encourage you to do all four of them. One is live differently. Live differently.

[26 : 15] Live right. Don't live like others. Don't try to be a little bit better than somebody else. Don't try to live a little bit higher standard than somebody else. Choose to be different for the sake of Christ.

Live differently where somebody will ask. Even if they don't ask you, they may ask others. What's so different about them? What makes them so different? Live differently. The second thing is pray intensely. It is not our ways, but his work. So do everything as if it depends on you and pray fervently as if none of it depends upon you. But pray intensely. And then also invite consistently.

Don't let up. Invite folks to come to Christ. Invite folks to come to church. Invite folks to come to a special event that we may hold. Invite folks to come to your life group. And don't just invite one. Invite somebody else.

And don't just invite them once. Invite them again. When you see somebody here that you don't know, introduce yourself. Don't be embarrassed you don't know their name. They don't know your name either.

Introduce yourself. Introduce yourself. Welcome them. If you don't know them, they don't know you. Don't worry about it. Just love on folks. Decrease so Christ can increase. Invite consistently.

[27 : 52] And lastly, point to Christ insistently. It's not about us. So don't talk about us. Speak of him.

Give Christ the glory. Let's make it our jobs to clear the way and then get out of the way and let God do the work as only he can to clear the way.

College football is about to come back. The best time of year. And there's some unsung heroes on the field that you may not pay much attention to.

But they make a lot of difference. And if they don't do their job, a team's not going to be successful. And that's offensive linemen. You don't hear much about offensive linemen.

They don't get a lot of attention. But if they don't do their job, the guy who's carrying the ball can get where he needs to go. The one who throws the passes and stands in the pocket won't have a pocket if the offensive line ain't doing the job.

[29 : 02] And as much as you may not know, the reality is they all have responsibilities. Not just to block the guy in front of him. Block him a certain way. To move his body and pivot him a certain way.

To make a hole for the ball to go through to keep it going. And when somebody scores a touchdown, you hear the name of the person that scores the touchdown.

When somebody catches a pass, you hear the name of the one who threw the pass. And the one who caught the pass. You don't hear about those guys on the line. You know what they do? The big uglies just go off the field.

Go get some more water. And get ready for the next series of downs. To come back out. To make a way. They'll go on if they're really good.

And they'll make millions of dollars more than some of the guys behind them. Because they're so good at what they do. But you won't know their names for the most part. Not most people that watch college football.

[30 : 00] But they prepare the way. You know what we need to do? We need to make a hole. We need to make a way. We need to quit worrying about who gets the acknowledgement.

Worry about who gets the attention. And make the way for the Lord Jesus to do whatever he'd have to do. Let that happen in our lives.

Let that happen in the people that we interact with. Let that show in the way that we pray. Let that show in what we talk about. Let's just make Jesus what it's all about.

And I'm telling you. Just like John the Baptist. If we'll just keep pointing to Jesus. People's lives will be changed. Not because we got the attention.

And not because it was about us. But because it's about him. And when he's honored. And glorified. People will be drawn to him.

[31 : 01] And lives will be changed. With every head bowed. And every eye closed. I want to ask you this morning. If you've ever given your heart and life to the Lord Jesus Christ. If you haven't.

I want you to know that today's the day of salvation. And if you'll acknowledge the sin that is within your life. The times that you've done wrong before the Lord. And ask him to forgive you.

And be willing to walk away from that. By his power and by his strength. Empowering you. He'll save you today. And change your life forever. Not only will you get an uptick of life here.

But you'll spend eternity with him. As well. Maybe you're here this morning. And you have done that. But you did it privately. And you never acknowledge that publicly. Jesus by his example.

That we just talked about. And by his commission. That he closes out with. Tells us to follow that personal decision up. With baptism. If you've never been baptized as a believer.

[32 : 01] I encourage you. To come. We'll be doing that soon. Won't do it today. We'll line that up. But I encourage you to come. Maybe God's drawing you to First Baptist Church.

And God's doing a mighty work among us. And maybe. Maybe God is leading you here. To come. To be a member of this church. You come.

We'd love to guide you in that process. Of how that works. Maybe you're just here. And. It's been too much about you. You've been doing it your way.

Instead of God's way. It's not been about preparing the way. Or clearing the way for the Lord. It's been about your way. And you need to lay some things down.

Before the Lord. To be faithful. To him. Today. You can do that. Where you'll stand. You can do that at his altar. I'll be happy to pray for you. I have no idea how God's working in your life.

[32 : 57] But I know you'll never be satisfied. Unless you're obediently. Obedient. And you'll follow him. Just do what he tells you to do. This morning.

Lord Jesus. I love you. I thank you Lord. For the love that you have for us. And I ask your God today. That you'll work. And you'll move in our lives. And help each one of us.

To simply be obedient. As you speak to our hearts and lives. In Jesus precious name. Amen.