

The Baptism, Temptation, and Message of Jesus

Mark 1:9-15

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Most of the time, when you read a story, the author takes great pains in introducing you to the story's main character. They try to describe to you their appearance, their temperament, and any other number of things about them, so that you can have a pretty good picture of who this person is right from the outset.

Mark's gospel doesn't follow that pattern. It starts, not by talking about its main character, but by talking about John the Baptist. When we do get to the main character (Jesus), Mark doesn't spend much time giving us background information. Rather, he jumps right in to what he believes is most important—showing us what Jesus said and did.

In our passage this morning, Mark introduces us to the main character of his gospel. He doesn't tell us about Jesus' birth or childhood, but starts at the beginning of Jesus' ministry at around age 30. In today's text, Mark tells us about three different things Jesus did. He mentions them each briefly, but each is important and unique to Jesus. We'll look at each of the three scenes Mark sets for us in turn.

Baptism

The first scene is Jesus' baptism.

⁹ One day Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan River. ¹⁰ As Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice from heaven said, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." (Mark 1:9-11, NLT)

Last week we were introduced to John the Baptist, who was baptizing people and calling them to repent of their sins. John knew what his role was. It was to prepare the way for the Messiah to come. He was to serve as the Elijah who was promised at the end of the Old Testament. He had told the people that another was coming whose sandals he wasn't even fit to untie.

Mark fast forwards to the day Jesus showed up to where John was preaching and asked to be baptized. Now, this raises pretty big question—why did Jesus want to be baptized? John was calling people to repent of their sins and be baptized as a sign of this commitment and new life. Jesus was sinless, so He had no sins to repent of. So why be baptized?

In Matthew's gospel, we are told that John had the same question! When Jesus came to be baptized, John said Jesus ought to be baptizing him! Jesus' told John that he should baptize Him to because they must carry out all that God requires. To be honest, that

doesn't give us a whole lot more information. To John's credit, he doesn't demand further explanation, he simply goes along with what Jesus tells him, and baptizes Jesus.

People have come up with all sorts of ideas of why God may have wanted Jesus to be baptized.

- It was a way of identifying with the people—a way of Jesus saying He was one of us now.
- It was a way of inaugurating His public ministry.
- It was a way of validating John's ministry.
- It was to set an example that we are to follow in our lives.

To be honest, I'm not sure if Jesus was baptized for one or all of those reasons. I think the important point is that Jesus was obedient to the Father in coming to be baptized. That's also why we see the response of the Father and Holy Spirit immediately afterward. We are told Jesus saw the Heavens splitting apart and the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove. It says that this is what Jesus saw, so it's likely that the others gathered around that day did not see the same thing, but Jesus saw the Heavens opened as He came up out of the water. I like the way one commentator put it—when Jesus was baptized “all Heaven broke loose!”¹

We are also told that the Lord spoke to Jesus and reminded Him of His position as the dearly loved Son who brings great joy to the Father. Certainly Jesus understood these things, but hearing them reiterated should have given him encouragement and strength.

Additionally, we are told the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove. It doesn't say the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove, but *like* a dove. So, there was no actual dove at Jesus' baptism, but rather the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus peacefully and gently. This was something the crowd (or at the very least, John) was able to see, because later John says this moment confirmed to Him that Jesus was the Messiah.

It is interesting to note that at this event we see all three persons of the trinity present. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were all present and active in Jesus' baptism. Those who deny the trinity have a difficult time trying to explain this account.

The big question though, is what are we to learn from this account? I think it's actually pretty simple: God desires for His children to be obedient to Him. The Lord was pleased with Jesus' obedience. He is also pleased when we obey. Both Jesus and John give us a great example of this kind of obedience. They both did what the Lord asked of them, even though they may not have always understood all the reasons behind it. Rarely will we understand the fullness of God's plans, but we can still do what He requires, even if we don't get an explanation for it. As we do that, I believe we will please the Lord as well.

¹ Garland, David E. *Mark*. The NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996.

Temptation

The second scene of this story occurs immediately after Jesus' baptism, and it is kind of unexpected.

¹² The Spirit then compelled Jesus to go into the wilderness, ¹³ where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. He was out among the wild animals, and angels took care of him. (Mark 1:12-13, NLT)

What I find fascinating in this account is that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and then immediately led Him into the wilderness to be tempted. This reminds us that not everything God leads us to do is going to be easy. In fact, sometimes we will be led into the wilderness—but those times are not meant to destroy us, but to strengthen us, to help us find our strength in Him.

I believe that's what happened to Jesus as well. Mark gives us very few details about Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, but the other gospels give us a bit more information. Satan tried to tempt Jesus by appealing to his physical desires: his hunger or a desire for power. These are temptations Satan also often uses with us, but to much greater effect. He tempts us to indulge our desires in ways that are contrary to what God has said, promising us that by doing so, we will truly find what we are looking for. But this is a lie. Jesus knew this, and responded to Satan's lies with the truth that comes from the scriptures. When Satan lied to Jesus or twisted the Word of God, Jesus responded by quoting scripture to him. Truth is the ultimate antidote to Satan's lies—and truth is found in God's Word alone.

Though Mark doesn't give many details about Jesus' temptation, he does mention that Jesus was out among the wild animals, and that angels took care of Him. Why mention the wild animals? Doesn't that go without saying, since Jesus was in the wilderness?

I suspect he may have been drawing a contrast between Jesus' temptation and Adam's temptation. Adam was tempted by Satan in the garden of Eden, surrounded by animals, but they were all tame. He was in the perfect environment to stand firm, and yet Adam gave in to Satan's temptation. Jesus (who Paul calls the second Adam) also faced temptation from Satan, but everything else about His temptation was different. Instead of being in the garden of Eden, Jesus was out in the wilderness, a dangerous place for anyone. And instead of being surrounded by tame animals, He was surrounded by animals who constantly put His life in danger. The greatest difference of all, however, is that despite the deck being stacked against Him, Jesus stood firm against Satan's temptations. He resisted them and was victorious.

As we talk about Jesus resisting temptation, it reminds us of an important truth: being tempted is not sinning. Jesus was sinless, yet He was tempted by Satan. So don't be discouraged when you find yourself tempted to sin. Being tempted does not mean you have failed, it just means a battle is being waged and you need to fight. So when you feel temptations rise, steel yourself to stand firm, as Jesus did.

Message

After Mark describes Jesus being tempted in the wilderness, he describes the message Jesus proclaimed.

¹⁴ Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. ¹⁵ "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14-15, NLT)

Mark said Jesus went to Galilee shortly after John was arrested. John the Baptist got arrested because he ran afoul of Herod Antipas, because he preached that it was wrong for Herod to have married his brother's wife. Herod didn't like this, so he arrested John and later had him killed. Mark doesn't give a specific time that Jesus was preaching in Galilee other than that it was after John was arrested.

Galilee was the northern part of Israel (with Samaria in the middle and Judea in the south) and was where Jesus was from. Mark says that Jesus preached God's Good News, but doesn't really define what that is. Instead, he tells us that Jesus told people to repent of their sins and believe the Good News because the Kingdom of God is near. There's a lot in that short message that we should take time to unpack.

First, Jesus tells people to repent of their sins. Jesus doesn't gloss over or excuse sin. Many today declare that Jesus preached a message of love (which is true) and that He wouldn't condemn anyone's life choices (which is not true). Jesus welcomed anyone who would come to Him, but He never said that it was ok to live in disobedience to God. Quite the contrary, Jesus calls people to repent of their sins.

The word repentance literally means to go in a different direction, to have a different mind. To repent means to turn around and walk away from the sin we had previously been engaged in. Many people are unwilling to do such a thing. They are more in love with their sinful lifestyle than they are with Jesus. Jesus tells us later that we cannot serve two masters, we must choose. If we choose to continue in a pattern of sin, we are choosing to walk away from the Lord. If we choose to follow Christ, we will turn away from sin.

To be clear, we are supposed to turn from sin because we know it is wrong. But most of the time, our motivation for dealing with sin is to avoid the consequences of sin. Many of us would go back to certain sinful behaviors if we thought we could do so without any consequences. This is not genuine repentance. Jesus calls us to hate our sin because it is an offense against a holy God. If we take that view of sin, we will work to leave it behind, even if it seems like there are no consequences for continuing in it.

Second, Jesus calls people to believe the Good News. At this point, Jesus didn't go into much detail about what that Good News was. He says the Kingdom of God is near, meaning the long-promised deliverer was here. He's making a claim that He is the promised Messiah. But at this point, no one really understood what the Messiah would

be like, but they would have known that it was good news that He was here. Jesus says the appropriate response to this realization is to turn from sin and turn to God.

Today, we have a fuller understanding of Jesus' Good News—He has come into the world to offer forgiveness of our sin. But the Gospel message actually starts with bad news. We have to recognize the seriousness of our sin, the fact that it makes us enemies of God, and that we cannot erase the sins of the past by doing good things in the future. Until we recognize that we need a savior, the existence of a savior isn't good news! As we share the message of the gospel with others, we have to start by helping people to realize that they (like us) are desperately sinful, and that our sin separates us from God. We're not "basically good" people, we are sinful and rebellious, and our only hope is for someone to save us from ourselves. It is only once people come to understand that truth that they will see the message of Jesus Christ as the Good News that it is. Like Jesus, we must call people to embrace the good news of the gospel and turn from sin, and toward the Lord.

Conclusion

Mark's gospel tends to mostly hit the high points of many of the stories of Jesus. He doesn't tend to go into great detail and often we can be left with many unanswered questions. But I think there is some value in the approach Mark takes. Because he doesn't venture into details, he keeps the message and methods of Jesus front and center. Hopefully this will help us to keep our focus where it needs to be as we study Mark's gospel—on Jesus Christ alone.

With that said, I think there are several concluding applications we should draw from this passage.

First, God's will is for us to obey Him. This seems elementary, but I believe it is something we need to be reminded of often. I often hear people questioning what God's will for them is. It is not that complicated—He wants us to do what He's told us to do. Sometimes we're looking for much more specific guidance: what job should I take, what school should I attend, what purchase should I make, who should I marry? We are often looking for a direct answer when we ask such questions. But I think God's answer is far more simple—I want you to do what I've told you to do.

When wrestling with a decision, ask yourself if you will be obeying God's commands by what you do. If you want to know if you should marry a given person, think about what God has commanded. Is the person a believer? Are they committed to serving the Lord alongside you as your partner? Are they helping you to grow in your faith or pulling you away from the Lord? If the answer to any of these is no, you don't need to wait for some mystical answer from God. When God has spoken clearly about some issue in His word, we don't need further clarification. God's will is for us to obey Him.

We are amazing at finding ways to rationalize our sinful behavior. Often, we can even convince ourselves that our sin is even admirable! This is common in our world today. But if we are going to seek God's will, it means that we will evaluate our actions by

God's Word rather than by our justifications or the current trends in our society. Even as believers, we will often need to repent of sin in our life. One of the things that happens as we grow in our faith is that we realize just how sinful we really are. Repentance should be a constant attitude of believers, because we know that doing what God has said is best and brings honor to Him. So we should be diligent in identifying the things that are not as they should be and going in a different direction.

Second, God gives us the power to resist temptation. Jesus' temptation serves as an example to us. The Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where He would be tempted. I don't believe the goal of this was to try to make Jesus fall, but to strengthen Him as He stood firm against Satan's attacks. One of the best ways to become strong in faith is to exercise that faith in all things. Big faith, like big muscles, isn't built overnight. The more we exercise our faith, the stronger it will become. So we should fight temptation in all its forms. Sometimes we don't bother fighting against the "little" sins in our lives, because we think they're no big deal. But rather than seeing these as areas where we can be lazy, we should see every temptation as an opportunity to grow stronger in our faith. Each time we face temptation and resist the devil's attacks, we grow stronger and gain a greater ability to stand firm in the future.

The best way for us to stand against the lies of Satan is to rehearse the truths of scripture. Study God's Word on your own. Memorize verses that give you encouragement and hope. Write them on notecards and put them around your house, your office, or your car. Talk to other believers who will encourage you to do what is right rather than what is easy. And remember that you do not fight alone. The Holy Spirit is with you, just as He was with Jesus. Jesus has shown us how to resist temptation, we must follow His example.

Third, the gospel really is good news. As we talk about repentance and changing the way we live, people often are turned off. They claim that all religion is just a list of rules to follow to make you feel better about yourself. But the gospel message is more than just a list of rules to follow. God has told us how we are designed to live, but we have rebelled against Him. We live in open defiance of Him. As a result, we deserve to be banished from His presence and forever separated from Him. But Jesus offers us forgiveness, new life, and restoration. The changes we make in our lives are not to earn God's favor—because we can't earn it—but it's to honor Him. It's because we trust that His way is better. The message of the gospel is not only good news for the future, but also in the here and now. This is the message we need to help our world to see. It's the message we need to embrace for ourselves as well.

As we study Jesus' life, we will be challenged to confront our own sinfulness and we will be called to go in a different direction. Jesus' message isn't always easy—often it will challenge and stretch us, but His way is always best. We must learn to take Him at His Word, to trust Him, and to follow Him with our lives.

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