

The CITYGATES C H U R C H

Mark 1:1-11 What is Baptism?

Summary: The beginning of the gospel is a call to change and be cleansed.

Over the Christmas break I pulled out the Lord of the Rings extended edition DVDs and watched a little bit each night with the family. There are so many great scenes and great lines, though, of course, the books are even better. One of those great scenes is the lighting of the beacons – a series of prepared bonfires that can serve as an emergency signal between Gondor and Rohan, two historically allied kingdoms separated by a mountain range.



Aragorn, the Ranger, is in Rohan, sitting outside, deep in thought when, suddenly, he sees the nearest beacon burning. So, he gets up, sprints the stairs, and bursts through the doors of the king's hall interrupting everyone and everything, yelling, "The beacons are lit, Gondor calls for aid!"

The energy, intensity, and immediacy of the scene reminds me of Mark's gospel. My wife says this portion of Scripture seems like it was written by a teenage boy whose is focused on all the action – the word [immediately](#) occurs 41 times. Matthew and Luke open their gospels by sharing Jesus' backstory and lineage. John begins by telling us His theological significance. Mark cuts straight to the action and opens with John the Baptist bursting onto the scene, like Aragon rushing in with important news.

So, we'll jump right in too this morning. We'll meet John and learn why he was called 'the Baptist,' we'll consider his message and the people who flocked to hear it. We'll ask why Jesus was baptized, and we'll consider why all this still matters today. Read with me:

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.”

John was an interesting character. I bet he was the kind of guy that if you knew him, you weren't really sure what to make of him. You'd like some of the things he said and did and then wonder if he was taking things too far at times as well. He'd be one of those friends you have to think twice before adding to the guest list.

If you read Luke's gospel you learn about the miraculous circumstances surrounding his birth – his mom and dad struggled with infertility their whole lives. Having a child seemed impossible to them. His dad, Zechariah, was a priest and while he was in the temple serving one day, an angel appeared to Zechariah, told him God was giving them a child and the child would have a special mission:

Luke 1:16 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.”

Which is exactly what we find him doing in Mark's gospel – making **ready a people prepared for the Lord**.

How was he doing that? Well, let's talk about his purpose, his appearance and location, and his message.

John's purpose was to announce the coming King.

We just had Christmas recently and that means some of you had visitors. And you had to prepare for that. You had to clean, maybe repair something, maybe buy something. You spent time getting ready because you knew you were receiving guests. At work how many times have you done the same thing for the boss or a delegation of VIPs? In England they always joked that wherever the queen went she could smell fresh paint. People prepared for her arrival, even if she was only passing through.

Well, John was sent by God as

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

Hundreds of years before Jesus was born the prophet Isaiah said someone would come before Him announcing His arrival, just like a herald would go before ancient kings telling people who was coming down the road. "Get ready," John said. God is doing something and we need to prepare the way, straighten things up. But he wasn't riding through town like Paul Revere making a lot of noise about it.

John's appearance and his location were austere.

He was out in the desert, not the big city and he was

6... clothed with camel's hair [had] a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

This was likely a tunic woven of camel's hair. It wouldn't have been unusual, but it wasn't considered a luxury item or chosen because it was so comfortable. And that was the point. It was a simple, functional, garment suited to the rugged conditions where he was. And so was his diet. It may sound strange to us, but if you read Leviticus, you find a list of foods kosher Jews were able to eat and foods they had to avoid. Locusts were actually on the good list.

Still today in some parts of the world, insects are a normal part of the diet. And perhaps you've seen that some companies are trying to convince us to eat more of them today. No thanks personally, but the point is, it can be, and it is, done. Israel is also home to over 1000 kinds of bees and occasionally John supplemented his locusts with a little sweetener.

If you're grossed out by this, that's not the point. John is not meant to be seen as a wild man, half crazy, on the mental health watch. Hundreds of thousands of people actually came out to hear him speak. His appearance and location were simply meant as a sharp contrast to all that was happening in Jerusalem.



Jerusalem was the center of religious and civic life in Israel. The Temple was there and so were the leaders of religious groups like the Scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees who had special prayer shawls and robes and head coverings. In other words, they had all the trappings of religion, but – *and this is one of the key warnings of the gospels* – they had lost a true connection with God.

So, God sent John out into the wilderness to call people to wake up, to change, to prepare for what He was doing next.

And the location of the wilderness is important. God had led His people into the wilderness before. Those of you doing the Exodus study know this. God led them out of slavery in Egypt through the wilderness, and then across the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

Now people are heading out into the wilderness to see John standing in the Jordan River, telling them to prepare for the Kingdom of Heaven. John is calling them to prepare for a spiritual Exodus.

John's message was change and be cleansed because the King is coming.

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

John was telling people: the LORD is coming, and you're not ready to meet Him. Your life must change. Repentance is not regret – it's not just feeling bad about what you've done. Repentance is not an emotional event, a strong feeling you had one time, it's anchored in the mind, the will, it's a choice, a determination. When someone truly repents, you can tell, because there is evidence in their life.

You can see that in Luke's gospel where we find more details of what was happening when John was preaching. Keep a finger here in Mark, but flip a couple of pages to the right and look with me at

Luke 3:7 Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, "Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 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. 9 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Just last week we saw Jesus say that God wants fruit from our lives – spiritual fruit defined in Galatians as **love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, gentleness and self-control** – this is the goal of our lives – to experience these values, these virtues growing in our lives as we abide in Christ, as we remain closely connected to Him.

But, we hear something else again as well – God has no tolerance for those who do not bear good fruit. He has no tolerance for those who instead on remaining isolated away from Him. There is a judgment for a sin. God does not turn a blind eye.

10 So the people asked him, saying, "What shall we do then?"

Notice this – the people understood, the proper response to John's message was not just faith, not just feelings, but also concrete action. They ask: *What shall we do then?* And now John gives them very practical answers – this is what repentance looks like:

11 He answered and said to them, "He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise."

12 Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?"

13 And he said to them, "Collect no more than what is appointed for you."

14 Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, "And what shall we do?"

So he said to them, "Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages."

People at every level of society were hiking out into the wilderness to hear a man who had nothing special about him call them to repent – to change their thinking, their values, and

their actions – and people were publicly confessing their need to change, then getting into the water to be baptized as a result.

And it was everyone. Soldiers. Tax collectors. Religious Leaders. Along with everyday people. Men and women. Young and old. It went on continually for weeks if not months, possibly years – it was a widespread movement, a steady stream. They all understood John’s message – their lives needed to change, not someday, but today and they needed to keep at it.

Maybe you’ve been to a worship service or church or ministry event and there was some sort of call to response at the end. They said something like, “With every head bowed and every eye closed, if you want to surrender to Jesus today, just slip your hand up right where you are.” It’s a quiet, discrete, almost secret way to follow Jesus. That’s absolutely nothing like what was happening with John in the wilderness.

These people stood publicly, confessed their sins, and walked into the water to be baptized by John in front hundreds or thousands of other people. It required humility. It required conviction. It required sincerity.

Confession comes from the Greek *homologeō* – *homo* means same, and *logos* is word or speech. So, it’s to say the same thing. It’s agreeing with God about what is sin, and agreeing about its implications. It’s agreeing with God about what sin does to us and others and where it leads. Then repentance is turning from that. Determining to be done with it. By God’s grace and with His help.

The hard truth is confession and repentance can be difficult, they often require sustained effort. But, God is with you in it. He is encouraging you, empowering you, standing with you, and surrounds you with others who will do the same.

The good news is, the gospel is – you can repent BIG. You change ENTIRELY.

Think of it – *God* is calling you to change, so *it has to be possible*. You are not so broken that God can’t help or fix it. You might be tired. OK. You might have tried before. OK. You might not have much hope. OK. But *God is calling you to repent*. That means it must be possible. Will you do it? Will you fight for it? Will you keep pressing on? Will you try again? Just because it’s hard doesn’t mean you’re doing it wrong.

For more than twenty centuries people have been responding to God’s call – people all around the world from all kinds of settings and scenarios have turned from their sin and turned toward God to find remission of sins (that’s forgiveness) and cleansing and they have celebrated what happened with baptism.

So let’s talk about that for a moment.

What is baptism?

Throughout Scripture we find things and people being washed as a symbol of cleansing, sometimes to show their recovery and other times to say this one is special. The book of Leviticus is full of instructions on what and how to ceremonially wash. You can also think of the flood in the days of Noah as God baptizing the earth, washing it and cleansing it.

But baptism also applies to individuals. We become baptized because we have repented and changed, baptism doesn't actually change us by itself. The people coming to John knew that – they had already confessed their sins and repented and *then* they were baptized as a result, looking forward to what would come.

Today we look back and fully understand what they were looking forward to, and so we are also baptized after we confess our sin and repent.

Baptism is an essential part of the Christian faith. Jesus expects everyone who follows Him to be baptized, but it comes after you have heard the gospel, confessed your sins, and repented. He told the disciples:

Matthew 28:18 ... “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, **baptizing** them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even to the end of the age.*” Amen.

If you have not been baptized, you should be. Sometimes it just slips by and it's been a while since you were saved. You didn't mean to put it off, it just kind of happened. Well, if so, you need to prioritize that and we are happy to help. We will be offering a class on baptism in the coming months and I encourage you to watch for it and sign up.

The elders have recently completed a review of our stance on baptism and will be sending it out to members. The biggest part of that was including some recommendations on the timing of baptism for children. We want to encourage boys and girls to respond to the gospel, to confess and repent of their sins, and to turn to Christ for salvation, but we also want to avoid them doing it too early and then deciding later in life that weren't sure they really meant it.

As a result, our newly adopted recommendation is for parents to wait until around 12 or 13, a time of life traditionally recognized as the beginning of a transition out of childhood and into manhood or womanhood. As our children naturally begin to establish their own identity at this age, it's a perfect time for them to choose that yes, they want to recognize Christ as the foundation of their independent adult life.

And speaking of Jesus, remember, He was baptized too.

9 It came to pass in those days *that* Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. **10** And immediately, coming up from the water, He

saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. 11 Then a voice came from heaven, "You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Now, if you've been paying attention, you've probably got a question. And it's a good one. If baptism came after confession and repentance, and Jesus never sinned, why was He baptized? If you read Matthew's gospel you find John telling Jesus I need to be baptized by You. But Jesus said no, this is something that needs to happen. And that's for several reasons.

First, it shows God's endorsement of John's ministry, that He really was behind it. Second, it affirmed Jesus' willingness to live according to God's plan – which is what others were saying in their baptism too – I want to live according to God's plan. Third, it inaugurated Jesus' public ministry. Remember, Mark is telling us about [the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God](#). Well, for his version of the story, this is where things begin.

And here at His baptism, we see all three members of the Trinity – Jesus in the water, the Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and the Father speaking from heaven. But what He says absolutely floors me. "[You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.](#)"

Now Christian, if you are in Christ, God says *the exact same thing to you*. [You are My beloved son, or daughter, in whom I am well pleased](#). Remember, when God looks at you, all your faults and failures and shortcomings are covered, invisible, immaterial, because they have been dealt with in Christ.

Christian, you have to know, you absolutely have to know – that God doesn't love some future version of you, you when you get your act together, you when you make something of yourself, you after your next promotion. God has nothing left to give you – you've already got it all. You *are* [His beloved](#) and He *is* [well pleased](#). You *are* His dear child and He *is* delighted. You *are* His wonderful son or daughter and you *make* Him very glad. The call of the gospel is a call into relationship and He is happy to have you.

So, here's what I want you to be thinking about, asking yourself today.

1. What sins are getting in the way of Christ in my life? Where and how do I need to ['Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.'](#) "

Where and how is the path into my soul cluttered by pride, greed, lust, adultery – whether physical, emotional, or visual, envy, wrath and anger, drunkenness or other forms of excess and indulgence? We could all probably benefit from allowing an "Adopt a Highway" crew into our hearts to pick up to the trash and [prepare the way of LORD](#). So,

2. What does confession and repentance look like in my life? Where do I need to agree with God and make changes in my thinking, attitude, speech, or actions? Not just feel bad about what I've done, said, or thought, but make concrete plans to change – plans guided by God's Word and dependent upon His Spirit, plans that help me abide in Christ.

3. Have I been baptized as an adult in response to my confession, repentance, and the forgiveness I have received? Jesus said you should. Have you obeyed? We have copies of a document regarding baptism available at the Welcome Table, picking one up and reviewing it is a great next step.

4. If I am already saved, do I still resist the truth that Christ has come to me, the Holy Spirit dwells in me, and the Father is pleased with me? If so, why? I have teenagers, occasionally they struggle to keep their room, or other parts of the house clean – they need to prepare for me coming in, they need to make a way. But I still love them. Socks on the floor won't keep me from sacrificing my life for them. Maybe your room, spiritually speaking, is a mess – you should clean it up – but God still loves you. He even wants to come into that messy room and spend some time with you.

These things are true, church. This is the gospel. And it's just [the beginning](#). We have so much more to see and learn and experience in the coming chapters. I'm so glad we get to do it together.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

Mark 1:11 What is Baptism?

Summary: The beginning of the gospel is a call to change and be cleansed.

- What is the strangest thing you've ever eaten?
- Who did God use to prepare the way for Jesus to come into your life? What was the process like?
 - What kind of things clutter the way of Jesus coming into our lives? Don't think in abstract terms, think in concrete, personal ways. What gets in the way in MY life? How can those things be cleared?
 - Who might the Lord want to use you to reach, and how might you be able to help or encourage them to prepare the way?
- People traveled out to the wilderness to hear John. Have you ever gone out of your way to hear a pastor? Who was it and why did you think it was worth the trip?
 - Who is the wildest preacher you've ever heard?
 - What does the simplicity of John's lifestyle and location tell us about what to look for or expect from a church or ministry?
- In your own words, what is repentance?
 - What kind of 'evidence' or affect should repentance produce?
- When and where were you baptized? What circumstances led to it?
- If someone asked you to explain why Christians are baptized, what would you say?
- Can you believe that God is also pleased with you and calls you beloved? Why is this hard to accept at times?
- For more information on John the Baptist, review 2 Kings 1:8; Malachi 4:5; Matthew 17:10-13; and Luke 1:13-17.