



# BAPTISM: THAT STRANGE GATE INTO THE KINGDOM

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Mark 1:1-8  
Second Message  
Brian Morgan  
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We were on a family vacation at the north end of Lake Tahoe this summer when President Clinton and Vice President Gore visited to inspect the lake. I was amazed by the amount of work that went into putting on their short visit. Three different divisions of law enforcement had to work together for security purposes. Highways, bike lanes and even hiking trails had to be cordoned off for a week. Air traffic had to be diverted. Huge numbers of servants were harnessed to cook, clean and organize in preparation for the visitors. Protocol had to be staged and rehearsed. I wondered if in the midst of all the hoopla I might catch a glimpse of the President. One morning I looked out from our balcony over the lake and saw two huge marine helicopters coming over the horizon. They landed at the Hyatt Hotel, about six miles away. That was as close as I got to meeting him.

Following Israel's seventy-year exile in Babylon, the nation was told that one day her King would come to meet her. Before his arrival, Israel would have to make preparations to meet him. How different these preparations were than what were put in place for the Lake Tahoe ceremonies. Israel's King sent an entourage of one before him, a man who went around in a camel hair coat announcing the King's imminent arrival. And this servant asked the people to meet him in the strangest place, outside the city, in the desert, with no security agents or press in attendance. According to this messenger, just before the King was introduced, those who wanted to meet him would have to do an odd thing. They would have to go fully clothed for a swim in a muddy river. And this event was anything but exclusive. Tickets were free. But admission was somewhat embarrassing: people would be asked to publicly confess their sins. If this seems a rather strange introduction to God's representative King, we must understand the first century context into which Jesus came; then it will make perfect sense. Hopefully, as we gain this understanding we will get a glimpse of how radical Jesus was for his generation—and for ours, too.

As we come to the first eight verses of our study in the gospel of Mark this morning we will seek to answer four questions. First, what exactly was the gospel (*good news*) for which all Israel had been waiting? Second, who was that strange messenger, John? Third, what did it mean for a first century Jew to leave Jerusalem and go out into that wilderness to be baptized by John? And fourth, what significance does baptism have for us today?

## I. The Expectations for the Kingdom of God (1:1)

Mark opens his gospel with the title:

**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** (1:1, NASB)

This first word, *beginning*, harkens back to the first word of the book of Genesis: "In the *beginning*." Immediately we sense we are about to embark on something brand new, an epoch-making event that only God can accomplish. This is the beginning of the good news which all Israel had been waiting for

since they had been exiled to Babylon over four hundred years earlier.

The term "good news" comes from the prophecy of Isaiah (52:7; 60:6; 61:1). The prophet fills it with battle imagery:

**How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings good news,  
Who announces peace  
And brings good news of happiness,  
Who announces salvation,  
And says to Zion, "Your God reigns!"** (Isaiah 52:7).

Israel's God would be coming to do battle with Israel's enemies. The battle had been fought and won, and now a messenger comes to the capital city announcing the good news that with this victory, Israel's God was reigning as King over the whole earth. Tom Wright,<sup>1</sup> the leading contemporary scholar on Jesus in his first century Jewish context, summarizes in these words what it meant for a Jew in the first century to learn that the "kingdom of God" was about to arrive:

- Israel's exile and estrangement from God was finally over
- a new age was being inaugurated, characterized by the forgiveness of sins
- the gift of God's Spirit would be given to write God's law on the hearts of his people
- God would do battle with Israel's enemies and vindicate her over them
- Israel's temple would be restored and rebuilt
- the God of Israel would then bring his rule to the entire gentile world
- the prophet described all of these things in terms of a whole new creation.

For Mark, opening his book with the announcement that this was the *beginning*<sup>2</sup> of good news was to proclaim that Israel was standing at the brink of something very large indeed. What John was announcing was the climax of Israel's history, the dawn of a new age. Everything would center around the arrival of Israel's Messiah King, whom Mark identifies as Jesus, God's Son.<sup>3</sup> Mark will say that Jesus would fulfill all these things, but in ways the nation of Israel never imagined. Jesus would accomplish all of this in a revolutionary way that transcended all the old categories.

Next, Mark says that this King did not come unannounced. The prophets had said that God would send a *messenger* to prepare the way for his arrival.

## II. The Messenger of the Kingdom: John the Baptist (1:2-8)

### A. The Prediction of John (1:2-3)

**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,  
'Make ready the way of the Lord,  
Make His paths straight.'"**

Mark opens his story of *good news* by quoting Isaiah 40:3 and two other Old Testament texts, Exodus 23:20 and Malachi 3:1, to show that the ministry of John was predicted as a precursor to the arrival of the Messiah. All three texts, woven together by Mark, speak to the theme of Israel's exodus. Exodus 23:20 evokes the memory of Israel's first exodus out of Egypt; Isaiah 40:3 evokes Israel's second exodus out of Babylon; and Malachi 3:1 is a reference to Israel's final exodus into the Messianic Age. The prophets had said that the final salvation would appear in the wilderness. This is why many revolutionary movements were founded out in the desert.

Mark's point is that the time was now at hand. John's appearance in the wilderness signaled that this was the climactic moment of Israel's history. "John is apparently conscious 'of standing at the beginning of the unfolding of the eschatological drama.'"<sup>4</sup> Therefore, for a Jew to go out to the wilderness to meet John was to anticipate that this indeed was the time. The crucial moment in history had arrived. There would be no second chance.

So John's appearance is the fulfillment of that prophetic voice.

## **B. The Way of John (1:4)**

**John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

To prepare themselves to meet Israel's King, John asked people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. The book of Deuteronomy spoke of such a repentance (Heb.: *shuv*) which would end Israel's exile: "So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, and you **return** (*shuv*) to the Lord your God..., then the Lord your God will **restore** (*shuv*) **you from captivity**" (Deut 30:1-3).

Tom Wright calls this "eschatological repentance." This was what Israel must do if her exile was to come to an end, inaugurating the Messianic Age. What makes this so radical is that John was asking Jews to demonstrate their repentance. He doesn't ask them to take up arms against Rome, like the zealots, or to intensify their efforts at keeping the law, like the Pharisees. No. He is asking them to die, to enter a watery grave—to be baptized! This was a very strange thing to ask of a Jew. Baptism was an initiation rite for proselytes, not for Jews. For a Jew to be baptized implied that being born a Jew no longer counted for anything—as if they were "Gentiles." Baptism meant starting over. A brand new beginning, a new creation was required. People needed, as it were, a second birth of water and spirit (Ezek 36:24-27), which would transport them to Israel's final exodus into the Messianic Age. This is why I do not recommend infant baptism. Children should wait until they are old enough to grasp baptism's radical nature. Being born in a Christian home does not make you a Christian!

Even more radical than the act of baptism was the gift of forgiveness that John was offering Israel. And this gift was being offered outside Jerusalem, far away from the temple, the sacrificial system and the priests. People could partake of it out in the desert! John did not come to reform Judaism, he came to replace it, or better stated, transcend it. For the Jew, going out into the desert to follow John meant placing all his bets that this indeed was the time the prophets had spoken of.

There would be no second chance. All bridges to the past had to be burned. The same is true today when a Jew is baptized—his family holds a funeral service in memory of their lost child.

The same thing happened during the Reformation when the radical nature of baptism was recovered. Some of the disciples of the Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, felt the reformers had not gone far enough. They came to understand that neither the state nor their own families could make the decision for them to become part of the church, so they resolved to be baptized again. In effect, they were doing what John the Baptist had done. These individuals came to be called Anabaptists. They were held in contempt by the Catholic church and the Reformation church, and their blood was spilled throughout Europe. But what these Anabaptists taught became the foundation of our own doctrine of the separation of church and state. They paid with their blood the price of our individual freedom to become part of the church if that is what we desire.

So in these verses we learn that John the Baptist was predicted by the Old Testament prophets, and that his way, the way of repentance, was radical.

Next, we read about John's impact.

## **C. John's Impact (1:5)**

**And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.**

John was a very popular figure. He made a deep impression on everyone, because an authentic prophetic voice had not been heard for four hundred years. The Jews were so weary of centuries of oppression they were eager to take the risk of revolution. And yet, what a scandal John's popularity must have caused among the authorities. Tom Wright calls this the "scandal of *particularity*, (that [the Lord] should act here and now rather than at other times and places); the scandal that this was how the kingdom was coming; the scandal, too, of just who it was that [the Lord] was using, and the methods that he was employing. Like Salieri in Shaffer's *Amadeus*, scandalized that his God should choose the disreputable Mozart as the vehicle for divine music."<sup>5</sup> "John's magnetism and the mighty impact of his ministry anticipate the greater magnetism and mightier impact of Jesus the coming stronger one and of his ministry, just as John's death will anticipate the death of Jesus."<sup>6</sup>

## **D. John's Significance: Elijah (1:6)**

**And John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.**

Mark, the gifted story teller, draws the reader closer and closer into this scene. First, we hear the prophet's voice crying out in the wilderness from afar; then we see John in the distance, baptizing people in the river; next we are brought right up to the Jordan to see and hear the people confessing their sins; and finally we are brought face to face with the Baptist. It is as if we too are standing in line to be baptized. We are struck by John's appearance and his clothing. He is clothed in the garb of a prophet. A hairy mantle was the sign of a prophet in Israel (Zech 13:4). This is especially descriptive of Elijah (2 Kgs 1:8), whom the Jews were anticipating would return before the coming of Messiah. Malachi the prophet had predicted this: "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and

smite the land with a curse" (Mal 4:5-6). There is an ancient Jewish prayer that says, "May Elijah the prophet come to us soon; and king Messiah come forth in our days" (Sopherim 19.9).

One of the tasks of a prophet in the Old Testament was to anoint kings. No king in Israel ever ruled without prophetic sanction. David and Saul had their Samuel, Solomon his Nathan, etc. So John has come as the last in the long line of prophets. He would be the one to anoint Israel's final King Messiah. He is indeed Elijah who will announce Messiah.

#### D. His Message (1:7-8)

**And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."**

But what is new, says John, is that this coming King is in a different league than anyone who came before him. So much stronger than John is this one (a reference to this coming one's ability to deal with Satan, see Mark 3:27), John feels unworthy even to untie the thong of his sandals. "To carry someone's shoes after him or to take them off his feet was the work of slaves."<sup>7</sup> This act was thought to be so demeaning that not even a Hebrew slave was obliged to do it (Exod 21:2). Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: "All services which a slave does for his master a pupil should do for his teacher, with the exception of undoing his shoes" (*b Ket.* 96a).

John was giving the eschatological sacrament, but Jesus actually bestows the eschatological gift of the Spirit,<sup>8</sup> so that in the new age, that special anointing which was reserved for prophets, priests and kings in the OT will be given to every believer, without measure! (Acts 2:17-18; 1 Pet 2:9-10; 1 John 2:27).

### III. What did baptism mean for a first century Jew?

#### A. John's way was radical and revolutionary, but costly

Baptism was radical both in what it promised and what it required. It promised that the new age was about to dawn, an age of forgiveness that would transcend the Judaism of old, a new exodus to carry people into the Messianic Age. These are absolutely revolutionary promises. But what was required was equally as demanding. Baptism demanded public admission of one's depravity, the renunciation of any special status that Judaism afforded, and the legal protection that was provided under Roman law. One who was baptized could not go back. He would be considered an outcast to his family and he would be liable to suffer persecution by the religious authorities.

This is still true today wherever freedom is preached in countries that have a well established state church. Our friends in Romania minister within the Orthodox church. Their calling is to be a light of salvation in that dead, state run church. Some Christians, however, decided to build a new church in Cluj. When we were last there, they told me they had never had a communion service, and they asked me to be the first to hold such a service. I decided that one of the men who accompanied me on the trip should serve. My choice was Marty Brill, a Jew. He would hold the cup and serve believers in a country which had exported all of its Jews to Auschwitz during the Holocaust. In a very moving scene, one by one the entire congregation came up to the platform and took the cup from his hands. I thought of the verse in Zechariah, "In that day ten men will grab the garment of a Jew" (Zech 8:23). I would like to share with you what I wrote after-

wards:

A JEW

Marty's face,  
Marty's eyes,  
A Jew, a son, a poet  
alive.  
Marty, the Jew,  
serving them the sacred riches  
to every one, every one,  
for time stood still.

He took the bread,  
broke his blessing into song,  
he lifted the cup,  
and sang his shophar strong.

They came they came,  
everyone they came,  
one by one,  
to Zion,  
to the broken King,  
the outcast Jew.

In a nation,  
who with elation,  
deported and exported  
every one last Jew.

He lifted every face  
to that holy sacred place,  
and one by one,  
one by one,

they looked into the eyes  
of the Jew,  
and today,  
they saw You.

This was the day  
ten men  
grabbed the garment  
of a Jew.

This was David's dance,  
and Marty was our Jew,  
and from the balcony,  
even Michal beheld what was new.

What a holy time this was for all of us! After we returned home, however, my Romanian friends paid a heavy price for what they had done that day: they were excommunicated from the Orthodox church. My friend Jonathan was made to suffer greatly, because he had identified with me, a brother from the West. He would not give up his freedom in Christ, yet he wanted to remain in the state church and minister to the old guard.

John the Baptist's way was radical and revolutionary, and yet, by the same token, costly.

#### B. John's way was popular yet dangerous

The fact that so many followed John reveals the hunger and expectation of Israel and the bankruptcy of their current forms of religion to deal with evil in the human heart. So they came to be baptized. But the moment they did so they came under the paranoid eye of Rome, for it was in the wilderness that the revolutionary movements started. Whenever a prophet went out into that wilderness to announce freedom,

Rome was quick to meet the threat. During the short reign of Pontius Pilate's procuratorship (AD 26-36), we know of at least seven incidents when the Romans crushed Jewish movements that had any semblance of revolution about them. Identifying with John cost converts their family roots. It could even cost them their very lives. And it did. John the Baptist himself would be the first to be put to death by Herod.

#### IV. Will you be baptized?

Knowing all this, would you have gone to the wilderness? Would you have paid the price? Would you have gone into that watery grave? Baptism still remains the rite of initiation into the kingdom of God. It still is that strange gate to meet God. The act itself does not save us. Baptism is the public wedding ceremony of believers with the One who bought us, a ceremony that brings him the honor he deserves. The only difference today is that rather than anticipating the new age, baptism celebrates the new age as being already fulfilled. As we descend into the water we identify with Christ in his death, and as we ascend we celebrate being raised with him to newness of life. Baptism today is just as revolutionary and radical as when John introduced it.

But over the centuries baptism has lost this radical edge. In the Catholic church and in mainline Protestant churches it has been relegated to a priestly act for infants, undoing everything that John the Baptist stood for. And in the evangelical church we have ignored baptism and replaced the void with going forward at a meeting. But when we remain faithful to that voice in the wilderness, and submit to that watery grave, for a moment time stands still and all the holiness of the Messianic Age transcends upon us. May it be yours in full measure!

"It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery" (Galatians 5:1).

I have a friend, another Mark, who was baptized in Lake Tahoe in the presence of twelve brothers this summer. He would like to come and share with you how this radical event changed his life.

Mark Asplund: It is my privilege to share with you a significant event that occurred in my life this summer. On the shore of Lake Tahoe, with twelve disciples and a rabbi, I stepped into the water and was baptized. I have always been a survivor. I learned how to fight at a very young age. Never once did I turn the other cheek. Born and raised a Catholic, my life appeared simple. Little did I know that the sculpture of my life was cracked, damaged, and I was blind. When I became a Christian four years ago, pieces of my life sculpture began to fall off. Then, I was convinced I was broken. How wrong I was. This was just the beginning of a life's journey. Becoming a Christian opened my eyes and heart to the unconditional love of Jesus Christ. A damaged marriage, the never ending lawsuit, abuse and many other struggles were no match for the work of God. More times than I could count I longed to turn back to a pagan lifestyle. But the love and persistence of my wife, friends, and Jesus Christ helped me through this journey. It wasn't until I was submerged in the icy waters of Lake Tahoe that I finally realized I had been broken. The words for this poem flowed freely onto paper, capturing every moment of my life up to, during, and after my baptism. I did, however, struggle with a title. There was a part of me that wanted to title the poem "Washed Up," but that

wouldn't glorify God. A more appropriate title is

#### *Wonderful Counselor*

A journey ventured now four summers past  
Molding and shaping a tremendous task  
A life so lost I hadn't a clue  
Uncensored, outspoken, a longful Jew.

Cornered, I'd face my image in the mirror  
Longed to be cleansed by a resistant tear  
Lost at sea with no calming tides  
Vision refocused, twelve disciples arrive.

Your outstretched hand now guiding me in  
Washing away my guilt and sin  
A wonderful counselor, a rabbi's embrace  
Clutched in holiness, saving grace.

Then you raised me up  
An endless grip so tight  
Colorizing my life  
Beyond restraints of black and white.

Time stood still, a caesura of life  
Detailed imagery upon the waters lacking strife  
Restoration revealed, could I withstand  
Righteously developed by your master plan.

Gideon's trumpet sounding  
*Amazing Grace* at hand  
A paradigm of Christ's design  
Played out upon the sand.

The eagles soar, fowl appear  
Can this be the result of a fallen tear?  
A renewed life cleansed, a soul rejoiced  
I can't speak, no tone, no voice.

Then I stepped away from the shattered mirror  
No longer surrounded by turmoil and fear  
Deafen ears to the fighter's bell that summoned me  
Beginning a journey on bended knee  
Leaving behind a reflection of half the man I used to be.

Mark Asplund, August 1997

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1. See N. T. Wright's excellent work, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

2. "Beginning" is a word that reminds us of the first beginning in Gen 1:1, and prepares us for something brand new, epoch making as only God can do! The mention of the Spirit in verse 8 takes us back to Gen 1:2 with the Spirit of God brooding over the waters ready to create the cosmos. Now it broods over His people for a new creation.

3. "Son of God" in its original context did not necessarily imply "deity." Rather it was a term for Israel's king who was adopted into a "father-son" relationship to God at his anointing. See Psa 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14.

4. C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Cambridge UP, 1959) 48, quoting Taylor.

5. Wright, 228.

6. Wright, 98.

7. Cranfield, 48.

8. Cranfield, 49.