

## Good News For a Bad News World

Mark 1:1-3 say, "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"--"a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"

Gospel means "good news." And, the good news that John has been sent to deliver is that the Lord is coming, God is about to appear on earth. And, this is good news because the world needs help and still does. There is Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and the Palestinian Territories in the Middle East. There is North Korea. There is Darfor in the Sudan in Africa. There continue to be kidnappers and death squads in South and Central America. And, then, there are the crazed gunmen such as those who struck at Columbine, Lancaster, and last week at Virginia Tech.

Besides these, there are drug and alcohol addiction problems here in Blair County and in Altoona and pain enough right here among our own families to raise up the cry for a Savior. Our world needs help. Our nation needs help. Our local community needs help. We need help. And, the good news is that help is available. He has come. He is coming. He is here right now. He has come. He has entered into our sufferings. He has entered into our death. He has risen from the grave and ascended into heaven where He ever lives to make intercession for us all.

For all the mess in our world, for all the mess in our nation, for all the mess in our local community, for all the mess in our individual lives and families, there is good news. **There is good news for our bad news world. The gospel is good news.**

There is, however, one condition--one catch, caveat--if you will, to receive the help we need from above.

Mark 1:4-5 say, "And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River." Eugene Peterson translates it this way: "John the Baptizer appeared in the wild, preaching a baptism of life-change that leads to forgiveness of sins. People thronged to him from Judea and Jerusalem and, as they confessed their sins, were baptized by him in the Jordan River into a changed life."

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The condition we need to meet in order to receive a solution to the world's problems is a mass humbling, and a mass confessing, leading up to a mass turning to the Lord who lives to intercede and reign over us all. The bad news is that we don't see that happening today, nor does it seem that we are heading in that direction, but the good news is that that day will come. The world will be brought to its knees. What it will take I'm not sure; it will no doubt take something much bigger than WWI or WWII, perhaps a nuclear holocaust.

My son-in-law Matt is about to graduate from Penn State with a degree in Political Science, and from what he has learned and deduced from his studies, he is predicting another major war within the next 15 years. Maybe that war will bring the humbling. Perhaps it will be brought about by the collapse of our one-world economy. Perhaps it will happen on the heels of a major shift in the earth's climate or in the wake of a collision between earth and asteroid, I don't know what it will take. But, someday those who are left will be humbled, they will confess their rebellion against God and confess their impotence to help themselves. Someday the common threat will be so great that earth's people will forget their differences and pray as with one voice to the God of heaven, and He will hear them. The Day of the Lord will come. But here I speak of the end of days and see, as it were, "through a glass darkly." It is nonetheless, what Scripture points to and something I feel deeply in my gut. **That Day will come.**

Of more immediate concern are the things going on in our own individual lives and families. To what degree is your life and family in turmoil this morning? To what degree do you need help? There is good news for you and for your family but the condition, the catch, the caveat, is the same. The good news comes with this instruction: Confess your sins and turn from them, and embrace the changed life that God will give you as you turn to Him and obey His word.

At this point I think some of us are probably reacting something like this: "But you don't understand. My emotions desires, and lusts are just too strong. I'm only human and sometimes I just can't help myself. I know what's right and I want to do what's right but the urge to do wrong wins out. I know the Bible says we are to be holy and that without holiness no one will see God, but I just don't have the strength to change. What am I supposed to do?"

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Look at Mark 1:6-8: "John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

What we need to see here is that John represents the best that man can do. In Matthew 11:11, Jesus says, "I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

We are struck by John's appearance: "He wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist." We are baffled by his diet: "He ate locusts and wild honey." But these descriptions are telling us something. John the Baptist was a holy man. His strange clothes and diet were understood in his day to be signs of a prophet. He resembles Elijah and Elisha of old. His separation unto God in the wilderness showed him to be a man of prayer and a man of single-hearted devotion to God. Jesus said there was no one greater.

But what is really important here is the message the best of the best among men is not enough. No matter how hard we try, no matter if our will power is like steel, or no matter if we separate ourselves from society and live the life of a holy hermit, we cannot meet God's standard of holiness. We need greater help than this, a stronger, more powerful, baptism than John's. And, this is precisely the good news John has been given to proclaim.

John says, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." **Good news!**

In fact, this is the best news of all. This verse of Scripture marks the continental divide between the Old and New Covenants. The era of prophets, priests, and kings has past; the era of the Messiah has come. What the Law could not accomplish because of the weakness of human nature, is now made possible under the reign of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism could wash the outside of people, but baptism with the Holy

Spirit can cleanse and empower us from the inside out. **This is really good news!**"

Mark does not leave us in suspense as to the identity of this one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Mark 1:9 says, "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." Jesus is the One, the Savior, promised Messiah, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But, of particular interest to Mark, Jesus comes to baptize those who turn to God with the Holy Spirit.

But, what does this Spirit baptism mean for us? What does it look like in our lives? As I was looking over the Scripture passage for this morning's message, I suddenly saw something I had never fully understood before. What happens next is not just history. Rather, it is a model for every believer who has received this baptism. Mark 1:10-13 say, "As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him."

The sequence of events is significant. The Holy Spirit descends, God affirms, the Spirit leads, the devil tempts, the angels attend. You see, it's a pattern for every Spirit baptized believer. Just as Jesus received the Holy Spirit, so we receive the Holy Spirit. And, in giving us the Holy Spirit, the Father affirms us as His children, just as He affirmed Jesus as His Son. Then, just as the Holy Spirit sent Jesus out into the desert where He was tempted, the Holy Spirit takes us into battle with the Tempter and we, like Jesus--through the Spirit's power--resist and prevail. The wild animals are not allowed to have us any more than they were allowed to devour Jesus. Finally, the angels come to refresh us and to bind up any and all wounds we've received in the struggle.

It seems to me that the pattern we find here in Mark is repeated throughout our lives. Periods of healing and rest are typically followed by further empowerments and periods of renewed closeness with the Father, which are then tested with temptations and struggle, which are followed again by healing and rest. We can also see this pattern being repeated in the life of the church. Whole churches go through periods of blessing

and periods of struggle; it's a normal part of the Christian experience, the ebb and flow of life. The tide comes in and the tide go out.

But the really, really, really good news in the appearance of Jesus the Christ, who comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit, is that the Holy Spirit gives us the power not just to confess and turn from our sins but also the power to overcome them and to experience a real and abiding change in our lives. As Paul says in II Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" It will not come without struggle and it will probably not come without some scars, but victory over temptation will come and afterwards we will be comforted. **This is really, really, really good news!**

One significant question remains and that is, in the thick of battle, how do we access Holy Spirit power? Look at Mark 1:14-15, "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" If we are looking closely here we see a slight difference between the message of John and the message of Jesus. Of John, Mark says in Mark 1:4, " And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Jesus said, "Repent and believe the good news!" Jesus is telling us that Holy Spirit power is accessed by faith. When temptation comes, we believe the good news. We count on the Holy Spirit to help us and resist the temptation. We turn toward the Lord and begin to obey Him, and immediately, the Spirit is there to help us. **Good news indeed!**

We need to understand this morning that the coming of Jesus is good news. He comes to bring forgiveness for our sins. He comes to destroy death. He comes to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and to empower us to overcome our sins and to live godly lives. His message to us this morning is "Repent and believe the good news!" The One who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit has come.

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Mark 1:1-15

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