

# Talking With A Man Down By The River

Mark 1:4-11 February 12, 2025

Small towns like ours aren't usually homes to pop-up shops. Popups are temporary spaces, placed in specific locations for a few days or weeks to blitz a market or generate interest in a new product. From celebrity chefs to fashion brands to Pokémon, there are all kinds of popup shops out there. Even big name companies like IKEA and Porsche have used the model.

The most interesting has to be the Icehotel in Sweden. Since 1989, this hotel has been built anew every November, accepting guests from December till March. It's completely made out of natural ice and snow, and is redesigned each year.<sup>1</sup> The Icehotel has received travelers from all over the globe, who have the chance to stay in a never before seen, artist-designed suite.

In Mark 1, a different sort of popup grabbed Judea's attention. A wild and unique preacher opened a baptism ministry in the Jordan river. But this was not just some monk in the wilderness, this was a man with a *famous* past. The story of his birth would have been well-known: His father, a temple priest once spoke with an angel, who miraculously struck him mute. Later, he was healed when this son was born *far* past when his mother *should* have been able to have him.

But this remarkable baby did not grow up to follow in his father's footsteps, even though he, too, was a descendent of the great High Priest Aaron. Instead of priest, this fellow became a *prophet* of Israel - the first in *centuries*. And more than a prophet, he became the herald, the forerunner of the Messiah. Tonight we see Mark's record of John the Baptist's work and his encounter with Jesus.

**Mark 1:4 - <sup>4</sup>John came baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**

John was sent by God to accomplish this specific ministry. It was hyper-focused and limited in both time and scope. It really was a popup. The truth is, John wouldn't live much longer - we'll see that in chapter 6 - but this was what God called him to do: To preach and baptize and reveal the Messiah.

Mark is very brief in his description here. We know from the other Gospels that John also taught that the Kingdom of God was at hand and that repentance should be demonstrated through acts of justice and morality, what John called *fruits* of repentance.<sup>2</sup>

The *Jews* hearing his message and his call to be baptized would've had great cause for offense at his message and methods.<sup>3</sup> You see, it was all happening in the wilderness - the historic site of Israel's disobedience toward God. And *Jews* didn't get baptized. *Gentiles* had to be baptized when they converted to Judaism, but *not* the children of Abraham. On top of that, being dunked in the

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.icehotel.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Craig Keener *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*

Jordan would've brought to mind the story of Naaman the pagan, Aramean leper being washed clean in that river at the word of Elisha.

Now here's a new prophet saying, "You're *all* Naaman. You *all* need the same kind of conversion a pagan Gentile needs when he's brought into the family of God." He's treating Jews as pagans.<sup>4</sup>

Baptism does *not* earn you forgiveness. Don't misunderstand what Mark wrote. Scholars, linguists and historians agree that this verse is *not* teaching that you are baptized *in order to be* forgiven.<sup>5</sup> For one thing, this is *not* Christian baptism.<sup>6</sup> But secondly, we see that repentance precedes the rite of baptism, which then becomes the outward obedience and testimony that you had repented.

What is repentance? Repentance is first an acknowledgement that you *need* God's forgiveness and then choosing to not only change your mind but also your choices and actions accordingly. It means to turn away from your sin not toward a general sense of good, but toward God Himself.

**Mark 1:5 - <sup>5</sup>The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.**

This is a big deal. *Tons* of people in this southern region were steadily streaming to John and many (though not all) were having their lives truly changed by his teaching. This was no easy thing they were doing. To travel from Jerusalem to the Jordan was not only a 20 mile walk, you also had to come down 4,000 feet of elevation and then climb back *up* on your way home!<sup>7</sup>

But on top of that was the cultural and philosophical journey they had to make. They had to *leave* where the temple was and go out here to this guy who was saying, "I'M telling you the true way to be forgiven." This is a seismic event, theologically speaking. But we learn from the other Gospels it wasn't just religious Jews going out to him. Crowds of people were coming out, full of Pharisees *and* tax collectors and soldiers and everyone in between. And we see here they didn't just come to experience something exciting, they were confessing and believing his message.

**Mark 1:6 - <sup>6</sup>John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.**

Does Mark just want us to know John was a little strange? No. He wants us to know that John was a *prophet*. You see, this is how Elijah was described in 2 Kings.<sup>8</sup> And when John's father spoke with the angel, the angel said, "Your son is going to go in the spirit and power of Elijah and he's going to turn many people's hearts toward God and prepare them for the coming of the Messiah."<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Archibald Robertson *Word Pictures In The New Testament*

<sup>5</sup> Even Josephus declares that baptism was not the means of salvation in John's teaching

<sup>6</sup> Alan Cole *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

<sup>7</sup> Frank Gaebelin, D. A. Carson, Walter Wessel, and Walter Liefeld *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*

<sup>8</sup> 2 Kings 1:8

<sup>9</sup> Luke 1:14-17

The description of John paired with *where* he set up shop makes many people think he was one of the Essenes. They were a group of ascetics who believed in prophecy and had strong anticipation of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> There are definitely some overlaps between John's message and the Essenes, but there are also a lot of significant differences. Enough that it's unlikely *they* would've still listed him as a member.

**Mark 1:7 - <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, "One who is more powerful than I am is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals.**

Everything about what John said and did was signaling something new, something monumental - that God's dealings with mankind were dramatically changing. This sandal statement was part of it. The religious leaders of the day wanted the best places, the highest accolades, recognition in the marketplace, but not John. A few centuries later when the Talmud was compiled, Jewish rabbis taught that a disciple must do everything for his teacher that a slave would do for his master *except* menial things like taking off his sandals.<sup>11</sup> John's ministry was the start of a dramatic, new thing.

Meanwhile, the people wondered whether John was the Messiah himself.<sup>12</sup> He was very clear that he was *not* the Messiah, but that the Messiah was *much* greater than him - that the Messiah was God Himself Who was coming to ultimately judge the entire world.

It's interesting to me that John talks about how the people saw him as "powerful." He said, "One more powerful than me is coming." Clearly, there was great power in what God was doing through John. But he worked no miracles. He won no battles. There didn't seem to be any manifestations or exorcisms. Those aren't bad things, but they aren't the only ways God shows His power. God's power showed in John's *preaching* and through the work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people of every background out to hear this first preaching of the Good News of the coming Messiah.

**Mark 1:8 - <sup>8</sup>I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**

Did the people at the Jordan know what John meant by this? He didn't seem to explain it and *Mark* never explains it. We're left to discover it in Acts and in our own lives as we walk with the Lord.

John understood that his ministry and his baptism were only preparatory - there was something else coming. When you get to Acts, where the baptism of the Holy Spirit happens at Pentecost and the full work of Christ in His death and resurrection have been revealed, we learn that John's baptism isn't sufficient for Christians. In fact, in Acts 19 Paul meets some believers who received John's baptism and Paul has to tell them that the Holy Spirit exists and that *Jesus* is the Messiah and those guys were then baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

---

<sup>10</sup> William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

<sup>11</sup> Morna Hooker *The Gospel According To Saint Mark*

<sup>12</sup> Luke 3:15

But even in his limited scope, John was signaling here that real religion, true spirituality is not *just* ethical activity. It's not just about being nice or socially good. It wasn't just about people saying sorry for doing bad things. On top of Godly morality, it was about this full connection with God, being baptized with the Holy Spirit through Christ Jesus. Real Christianity is about seeking the God Who is seeking us and then living in His presence and having Him indwell our hearts.

A lot of times John the Baptist gets a reputation of being angry and crazy and overly harsh. He did say some very frank and difficult things to people. But his message was not a message of anger.<sup>13</sup>

If we want to know what John's message was like, we can go back to Isaiah 40, which is *about* John and his ministry. And there, describing the voice of the one crying in the wilderness, we read:

**Isaiah 40:1-2a - "Comfort, comfort my people," says your God. 2 "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and announce to her that her time of hard service is over,"**

John was sent to tell Israel that the Messiah "protects his flock like a shepherd, he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them...He gently leads those that are nursing."<sup>14</sup>

John's point was not only that people should get right with God, but that God *Himself* was coming to meet them. That's what Isaiah prophesied, and throughout the Old Testament it's made clear that only God can pour out the Holy Spirit. So, if the Messiah is the One Who comes and pours out the Holy Spirit, then He cannot be simply a man, He must actually be God.

**Mark 1:9 - 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John.**

Among the vast multitudes of people, suddenly Mark trains his focus on one Person - a *stranger* in their midst. You see, Mark has shown us all southerners so far. Suddenly, this one Man from the far north has come down to be baptized, walking maybe 75 miles to get there.<sup>15</sup>

John did *not* know Jesus was the Messiah. He says in John 1:31, "I didn't know him, but I came baptizing with water so that he might be revealed to Israel." No one knew. It had to be revealed.

The question is: *Why* did Jesus get baptized? He certainly didn't need to repent of anything. In fact, Matthew seems to feel a little uncomfortable that Jesus received John's baptism. He records that John tried to stop Jesus and Jesus *commanded* John to allow it to happen.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus did not *need* to be baptized. He didn't need forgiveness. He didn't need reconciliation with God. He didn't need to flee from the coming wrath. So *why* did this happen?

---

<sup>13</sup> Lloyd Ogilvie *Life Without Limits: The Message Of Mark's Gospel*

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 40:11

<sup>15</sup> R.T. France *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text*

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 3:13-15

It happened because Christ came to identify with us and to take our place.<sup>17</sup> To be forgiven, to be saved, human beings need our sin to be dealt with. It can't be ignored, it can't be swept under a rug, it must be judged. And so God promised to supply a Substitute for us so that our iniquity could be pardoned. To accomplish this, God promised that He would provide *Himself* the Lamb - the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus was baptized so that *you* could know that He identifies with you, that He loves you, that He is willing to take *your* sin upon Himself.

**Mark 1:10 - <sup>10</sup> As soon as he came up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.**

The Gospel of John reports that at least John the Baptist could also see this happening. This wasn't just a beam of sunlight shining down. Mark uses a strong word that means the sky was "rent asunder."<sup>18</sup> It was a dramatic event signaling the start of something new.

What was starting was Jesus' work and ministry. At the *end* of His Incarnate work, Mark will once again use this verb for tearing when he reports that the veil in the Temple is torn in two and Jesus is once more identified as the Son of God.<sup>19</sup>

John's ministry was forecast in Isaiah. Toward the end of Isaiah, in chapter 64, the prophet brings this request to God: "If only You would tear the heavens open and come down," and he goes on to ask the Lord, "how can we be saved from our sin?"<sup>20</sup> And here, God gives the answer.

**Mark 1:11 - <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased."**

In other world religions there are often many son gods. Zeus had Apollo, Hermes, Dionysus, a bunch of others. Odin had Thor, Baldr, and others with strange names. Jesus Christ is the *only, unique* Son of God, and He is the *only* way you and I can be saved from our sins.

Joshua, Elijah, and Elisha all had the Jordan parted, showing they were authorized by God. For Jesus, the Jordan wasn't parted, but the whole cosmos above it was!<sup>21</sup> This was not just some wise teacher, this was not just a good man from Galilee. This is the *One* we've been waiting for.

God said, "This is My Son." And in His message, He identifies Jesus as the figure from Psalm 2, from Isaiah 42,<sup>22</sup> the God-Man, Shepherd-King, Redeeming-Messiah that had been promised all the way back in the Garden of Eden. That's Who *God* says Jesus is.

---

<sup>17</sup> Lane

<sup>18</sup> Marvin Vincent *Word Studies In The New Testament*

<sup>19</sup> France

<sup>20</sup> Isaiah 64:1, 5

<sup>21</sup> David Garland *Mark*

<sup>22</sup> Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

Who do *you* say Jesus is? Jesus Christ is God come in human flesh, Who *came* to identify with *you* so He could be *your* Messiah and Redeemer and Friend and King and Savior.

To be saved by Him also means to surrender to Him and to serve Him. He came to us, now we must go to Him. To give our lives and hearts to Him, accepting His rule over us that we might receive *His* baptism. Morality isn't enough. Social justice isn't enough. "Speaking truth to power" isn't enough. We must have the intimate with-ness with Jesus, through God the Holy Spirit Who Jesus has poured out on us so we can have fellowship with Him.

For those of you who *have* received the Lord, the question is what your Lord has commanded of you? Up in verse 4 where it says, "John came baptizing," Mark does a funny thing. He wrote something like, "John came to pass."<sup>23</sup> We saw how the Lord had this plan for him to serve as the forerunner described in Isaiah. This beautiful, specific plan and calling.

What does God want to bring to pass through your life? What calling has He given specifically to you? Because God *also* has a plan and a will for *your* life and He loves *you* as a son or daughter and you are invited to please Him through the exercising of your faith and obedience. We may not be worthy to untie His sandals, but we're welcomed to be a part of His ongoing work. So, let's look on Jesus, listen to Him, and follow Him forever.

---

<sup>23</sup> Vincent