

**MARK 1:1–8.** (EHV)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is how it is written in the prophet Isaiah:

Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare the way for you.  
A voice of one calling out in the wilderness,  
“Prepare the way of the Lord.  
Make his paths straight.” [Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3]

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him. They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey. He preached, “One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Imagine if the new president took the podium for his inauguration speech after taking the oath of office and, with the attention of hundreds of thousands of cheering people in the National Mall, told them, “A president more powerful than I is coming after me.” It would be unheard of, not only because the president would be making a prediction about a future president, but also because no speaker talks up someone else in front of a crowd like that, when that crowd is there to see that speaker.

Apparently John the Baptist didn’t get the memo. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, even though he was in the wilderness and it wasn’t exactly convenient to go see him. Luke says crowds kept going out to him. Yet we never hear John trumpeting himself. His message was, “One more powerful than I is coming after me.” His message was, “Prepare the way of the Lord.”

**1.**

Even though John doesn’t talk himself up, Mark talks him up a little in telling the story of “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” He says the good news account of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with the appearance of Jesus’s forerunner, whom the prophets also prophesied. The prophet Malachi recorded God the Father addressing God the Son: “Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare the way for you.” And the prophet Isaiah prophesied where that messenger would preach—“in the wilderness”—and how he would prepare the way for God the Son: He would call out to people, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

And since God prophesied this forerunner through his prophets, and since he does not lie, that forerunner appeared in the person of John the Baptist. Only instead of Mark quoting John the Baptist preaching, “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight,” Mark tells us that John preached that message by preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Essentially John's baptism was the same as the one that Jesus instituted. The same phrase, "for the forgiveness of sins," appears in connection with both. But if there was a difference, it was perhaps in John's emphasis on repentance. Mark, Luke, and the apostle Paul all call John's baptism a baptism of repentance, and Jesus's baptism is never described quite that way, even though repentance is connected with it. We're even told that part of the baptismal rite for those who came to be baptized by him was that they confessed their sins—the Greek word suggests that they spoke them out loud. And we get the sense that this wasn't just a general confession of sin, but that each person confessed his or her own particular sins. If they stole, they confessed that. If they fornicated or cheated on their spouses or practiced any sort of deviancy, they confessed that. If they were liars and perjurers, they confessed that. If they were lawbreakers in some other way, they confessed that. If they had been ignoring God's word, they confessed that. If their sins were more internal than external, they confessed their grudges or jealousies or rebellious thoughts or immoral fantasies or whatever else was on their conscience as a result of John's preaching.

Clearly part of John's preaching, part of his preparing the way of the Lord, involved helping his audience to take their sins seriously, to see their sinful condition and the way their sinful condition expressed itself as a serious obstacle in the way of a good and proper relationship with God, and as a serious obstacle in the way of getting acquainted with and appreciating God's Messiah.

Imagine if all the grocery stores and restaurants in the country were going to close down within a year, but you didn't know about it. Imagine if you then happened to meet the person who not only knew about it, but was also the leading expert in independent, self-sufficient food production—whether by gardening or whatever else. If you didn't know that your reliance on grocery stores and restaurants was actually a problem, you wouldn't be prepared to meet that person. If you talked to him at all, you'd probably just say hi and comment on the weather. Even if you did ask him if he was from around here and what he did for a living, and he told you he was the leading expert in independent, self-sufficient food production, you'd probably just say, "Oh, that's interesting," and you wouldn't inquire much further. He would be just another guy to you, maybe a really nice, interesting, and knowledgable guy, but still just another guy. In the same way, John knew that if the people weren't aware of their sinfulness and didn't care about addressing it, they wouldn't really be ready to meet the Messiah, and they wouldn't really understand his message and his work and its eternal importance.

We, too, can learn from John's preaching. We aren't going to be ready to meet Jesus in his Word, and we aren't going to be ready to meet him when he comes again on Judgment Day, if we aren't aware of our sinfulness, don't take it seriously, and don't care about addressing it. And we aren't off the hook just because we have already been baptized. Martin Luther reminds us in his Small Catechism on the basis of Romans 6 that baptism means that the sinful nature in us should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires should be put to death. Repentance is a daily, ongoing thing for Christians. It is their breath. We need to know sin and death in order to know and appreciate Jesus and his righteousness and life.

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## 2.

But if that's where we ended, with awareness of our sin and concern about it, we would be no closer to righteousness and life than before. Yes, we would be even more miserable than we were before, when we did our best not to think about it and to ignore it.

John knew that too. That's why his baptism wasn't just a baptism of repentance. It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Those who came out to him didn't just confess their sins in the Jordan River. They confessed them and were baptized in the name of the Messiah to have those sins, and all their other sins, completely washed away.

And this good news was also implicit in John's general message, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." It's easy when we hear this to put our focus on "prepare" and "make straight." But think if you were in a medieval town and suddenly some messenger dressed in royal regalia arrived on horseback and blew his trumpet and said, "Make way for the king!" You wouldn't put the emphasis on "make way." You would put the emphasis on "the king." The king is coming to your town!

In the same way, John's message, "Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight," told them that the Lord himself was coming to them, the Emmanuel promised of old, the Wonderful, the Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. "One more powerful than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of his sandals! I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Yes, no one was more demanding, but no one was more gracious and forgiving either. In other words, John was saying that they not only had sins to repent *from*, they also had someone to go *to* in their sins for pardon, cleansing, renewal, life, and hope.

We, too, can learn from John's preaching. If we're hesitant to encounter God in his Word, if we're not exactly looking forward to his return on Judgment Day, if there's a part of us that is hoping that this whole business about Judgment Day and the world coming to an end is just a fiction, it might not just be because we don't want to take an honest look at our sinful condition. It might also be because we haven't yet come to grips with his forgiveness, patience, renewal, peace, and hope. The One who comes to us in his Word isn't just a just judge; he's also a compassionate father and savior. The One coming again to judge the living and the dead isn't just the One who throws into hell; he's also the one who graciously brings to heaven. He is the One who washed you clean in your baptism and gave you the guarantee of a good conscience before him. He is the One who gives you his very body and blood, the price of your salvation, in the Lord's Supper for the forgiveness of your sins. He is the One who listens as you confess your sins with everyone else in the general confession, and who listens just as well as you confess your private sins in the silence afterwards, and then pronounces through his called servant every time, "Our gracious Father in heaven has been merciful to us. He sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. By his authority I forgive you all your sins."

He is the One coming at the end of the world. Prepare the way for him. Make his paths straight. Examine yourself in the light of his holy law, be made aware of your sins, confess them daily to the One whose sandals you are not worthy to unite. But in confessing those sins, cast them at the foot of the cross to be dissolved in his blood. Drown them in the waters of your

baptism. Have them blotted out by his grace and mercy and stand up clothed in his worthiness, and behold your Savior, your King, your Lord. Amen.