

**Tom and Alberta Ecker**  
**Jesus Meets Us in Our Desert (Wilderness)**  
**Mark 1:4-11**

*<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup> And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. <sup>8</sup> I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*<sup>9</sup> At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

**IN A NUTSHELL**

In chapter 1, this is what Mark is saying to his Gentile audience: According to prophecy, **John the Baptist got people ready for the Messiah's ministry by preaching a message of repentance and forgiveness.** Jesus appeared and was baptized by John at which time he received "**the commission and blessing**" from his father to start his ministry.

Another point to consider from Mark is that he introduces Jesus and John the Baptizer as adult men. **Why would he do that?** One answer is that many of the Gentiles in the first century would meet Jesus through this Gospel as adults; they would **confess** Christ and be **baptized** as adults. Mark wants his Gentile audience to know Jesus as a grown man and to be swept up into the power and glory of the work of salvation that Jesus accomplished as an adult.

**To quote from *The NIV Application Commentary (Mark)* by David E. Garland:**  
*"The opening section of Mark is frequently used as an Advent text in lectionaries. Most Christians consequently associate it with preparing the way for a babe in a manger and assume that it has something to do with getting ready for the coming of the Christ by catching the Christmas spirit. Certainly, (Mark's text) does not lead us to a manger with angels singing, shepherds bowing, and a little drummer boy tapping out the beat. John the Baptizer does prepare the way by leveling the ground, so speak, in calling all Israel to repentance. He (John) humbly confesses that the gifts of salvation and of the Spirit are not his to give but another's (to give). His arrest, however, makes it clear that the way made ready for Jesus is not going to be a smooth path."*

### **APPEARED in the WILDERNESS (Mark 1:4):**

<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist **appeared in the wilderness**, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> **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.**

Garland continues to share important aspects about the background of Mark

1. Mark sprinkles the text with **scriptural allusions** (an indirect or casual reference) to give us the background he thinks is essential for evaluating Jesus. These allusions tip off the reader that **unseen forces are working within history to accomplish God's redemptive purpose**. Therefore, it is important to help modern listeners see these biblical allusions. It reminds them this story has a **much broader setting** in God's purposes for Israel's and all creation's redemption.

For example, the story starts in the wilderness (NIV, desert), not in the holy temple of the holy city (as in Luke) or with the heavenly council of God before creation (as in John). For Jews, the wilderness evoked a variety of **powerful biblical** memories and expectations. For one, it marked the place of beginnings. It was a region where **God led the people out and from which they crossed over Jordan** and seized the land promised to them. The wilderness was also considered to be the **staging ground for Yahweh's future victory** over the power of evil. Marcus, in *The Way of the Lord*, page 22, states that the wilderness is the place where it was expected that **a second exodus would occur (Isa 40:3; Ezek. 20:35-38), one that would surpass the first** – there would be no haste and no flight in fear (*Isa 52:1-12*), and the wilderness **would be changed into a paradise (Isa. 51:3)**.

The Jordan River was also evocative. It was **more than** simply a river to Jews; it **represented the border between the desert and the Promised Land**. This biblical imagery evokes **the expectation** that God is about to **liberate Israel again**. But Mark emphasizes that God now acts through his beloved Son. Remember, Israel was an occupied nation in need of deliverance. **Here in the desert, John apparently demands that all come for his baptism**. No one will get a bye in judgment. It is a remarkable demand because Jews believed that only gentile proselytes and those defiled needed to be immersed to clean themselves in their impurity (see for example, Naaman in **2 Kings 5:13**). To call all Israel to baptism implies in some way all Israel is defiled. Mark tells us that for whatever reason they come to John in droves **to get this cleansing in the desert**. They are, in effect, **backtracking** to the place where Israel had so many beginnings. The crowds presumably believed that he (John the Baptizer) was Elijah reappearing for his second career, to prepare for the imminent coming of God (*Mal. 4:5-6; see Mark 9:11-13*).

So lets quickly recap the personality and the setting as we move forward in the scriptural text today: John, a certified prophet had appeared (in the wilderness) as they used to do with regularity in the good old days, which could only mean the beginning of something and the end of something else was about to take shape. **The people came out to him (John) to get themselves ready**. Now, for a moment, let's switch to the original readers or hearers of this Gospel and share what the *New American*

*Commentary* instructs: In a sense, John is introduced abruptly. Certainly the original readers/hearers already knew something about him. **The locale of his ministry was the “desert” and it is the place where God meets, reveals himself to, tests, and saves his people.** The most distinct aspect of John’s ministry was his baptism or immersion of those who had repented of their sins, confessed them (v. 5), and as a result received forgiveness. Obviously the baptism symbolized the cleansing from sin that repentance effects. Evidently it was a new rite. It was unlike the self-baptism of Jewish proselytes, this baptism was administered to Jews by another person.

### **REPENTANCE ... FORGIVENESS (Mark 1:4-5):**

*<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a **baptism of repentance** for the **forgiveness of sins.** <sup>5</sup> 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.*

John’s message was a focused one and was like that of the prophets, and it consisted first of a call to repentance. The Greek word translated “repentance” literally means *change of mind*, but its New Testament meaning has been greatly influenced by that of several Old Testament words so that it refers to **returning to God and changing one’s whole course of life.** The word translated “forgiveness” means *sending away or remission.* **The question in Mark is, Will they (Israel) truly repent?** And, when the Son of David comes; will they **recognize** him and **receive** him?

Someone once said that a person cannot keep walking down a wrong road and hope that it will eventually turn out right. **That is a good picture of repentance.** Repentance is a person realizing that they are on the wrong road and then turning around so that they are going the right way. A person can know that they are on the wrong road and still not turn around. A person can even be sorry that they are on the wrong road. Mark introduces a healthy **“repentance for forgiveness of sins”** that was preached by John the Baptizer who encouraged a mindset of “confessing their sins.” The core meaning of this word “confess” according to ***MOUNCES COMPLETE EXPOSITORY DICTIONARY OF OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT WORDS*** is “to express acknowledgement of some sort” and can also mean to “profess or praise.” Let’s consider then that “confessing” can include a mindset of professing God’s sovereignty, praising God for his salvation (deliverance), and thanking God for something. **What is that something?** John the Baptizer says, “Forgiveness of sins!” Okay, was that confession intended to be a negative or positive consequence for Israel? Intended to be a negative or positive consequence for the original readers / hearers of Mark? And intended to be a negative or positive consequence for us today?

The arrival of Jesus to be baptized with the mass of people has perplexed many because it might imply that he was an evildoer who was now reforming his ways or was in some way subordinate to John. **But one should not understand repentance only as a turning away from something evil; it can also be understood positively as a turning toward God.** Jesus’ repentance here represents **openness to God.** John was calling Israel to acknowledge God’s judgment on Israel. Passing through the waters of the promise again, a new, forgiven Israel would emerge. When Jesus comes

to John for baptism, therefore, **he is consenting to this calling of Israel**. He is not seeking salvation for himself or fleeing from the wrath to come; rather, **he is joining in the renewal of Israel and in the march of God’s unfolding purpose in the world**. Like Moses, who gave up his regal status to **identify** with his people to **deliver** them, **Jesus humbles himself by entering the ranks of sinners and taking his stand with them, just as later he will die for them**. His baptism, therefore, launches him on the servant road of obedience, which ultimately leads to another baptism, his death (**Mark 10:38**).

The sobering and yet exciting news for the first century Jews, the first century readers and hearers of Mark, and the twenty-first century readers and hearers is that Jesus’ first coming is not as a powerful, conquering Messiah, an irresistible force, but **as a submissive Messiah, who yields in obedience to the baptism of John**. There is no reason for anyone after Jesus to hold back from confession and baptism, instead there is ample reason to **join Jesus** in this beautiful salvific act. Mark’s treatment of the baptism of Jesus Christ, though very brief, **is important from a theological standpoint**. The Gospel **opens** with a statement that Jesus is the Son of God. At the baptism God himself **affirmed** that Jesus is his Son. The purpose of both passages—and especially the second—is to inspire the readers / hearers to **acknowledge** Jesus as Son of God and to **love and take pleasure** in him. So, let’s now continue together to see more of the good news Mark has for us...

#### **CONFESSING (Mark 1:4-5):**

*<sup>4</sup> And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup> 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.*

Commentator William Barclay notes that confession must be made to three different people. First, **men and women must confess to themselves**. We all want to justify ourselves, to rationalize our sinful behavior. Sometimes we rationalize it, based on physical characteristics that we have no control over: “I’m Irish; I can’t help it if I get angry.” At other times, we justify ourselves by comparing ourselves to others: “At least I don’t drink as much as he does” or “at least I don’t smoke like she does.” The sin of **“at least”** may be one of the biggest pointers to sin in our lives!

Luke recounted a wonderful parable of Jesus that shows the sin of **“at least.”** Two men—one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector—went into the temple. **The Pharisee stood at a distance and prayed**, “Thank God I am not like other people, especially this tax collector. I fast, I tithe, and I do all the right things.”

**The tax collector, on the other hand, knew himself**. He repented. He confessed and called himself a sinner. Jesus commended him (**Luke 18:9–17**). Most people miss the marvelous thing about this story in their hurry to get to the parable. It is in **verse 9**: He also told this parable **“to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.”**

So the first step in repentance is to confess to ourselves that we are sinners desperately in need of a Savior. **Barclay comments**, “There is no one in the entire world **harder to face than ourselves**; and the first step to repentance and to a right relationship to God is to admit our sin to ourselves.” **Positive Step One** = Turning and Facing God as sinners.

Second, we must confess to those whom we have wronged. Jesus said that we must clear away human barriers before we come to the Father (**Matt. 5:22–24**). For most of us, it is easier to confess that we are wrong to God than to another human being. After all, the other person may not forgive us. He or she may agree with us that we are wrong and then we will be tempted to justify ourselves, to minimize our sin. One of the steps in Alcoholics Anonymous is to confess to people who have been wronged when it will do no further harm. **Admitting our sin to another person has the wondrous effect of loosening its grip on us.** Secret sins lose their power when they are not secret. **Positive Step Two** = Turning and Facing God as sinners who have sinned against others.

Third, we must confess to God. Echoing again the parable of the tax collector, Barclay notes, “It is not the man who desires to meet God on equal terms who will discover forgiveness, **but the man who kneels in humble contrition and whispers through his shame, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’**” (**Barclay, Mark, p. 15**).

A good example of a call to repentance is found in **Isaiah 55:6–7**: “**Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him return to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.**” Jesus called everyone to repentance (**Mark 1:15**). This repentance calls for a change of the entire person, physically, volitionally, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Through repentance and conversion, **humans dethrone themselves and place Christ on the throne as the rightful ruler.**

The one indispensable preliminary in confession and baptism was and is the change in man from rebelliousness to childlike trust and willingness to obey. “That shown, there followed life under God’s rule, described as feasting, marriage, wine, finding treasure, joy, peace, all the freedom and privilege of sonship within the divine family in the Father’s world” (**Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, p. 968**). **Positive Step Three** = Turning and Facing God as sinners who have sinned against God.

### **BAPTISM (Mark 1:5, 8, 9):**

<sup>6</sup> *John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.* <sup>7</sup> *And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.* <sup>8</sup> ***I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**”*

John the Baptist must have seemed bizarre, even dangerous, to the people of his day. He came preaching repentance for the forgiveness of sins and then he baptized Jews. We perhaps have lost sight of the meaning of his baptism.

For the Jews, baptism was primarily a cleansing. The bronze basin in the tabernacle represented this type of cleansing (*Exod. 30:18–21*). Cleansing was necessary before the priest approached the altar. Barclay notes that symbolic washing and purifying was woven into the very fabric of Jewish ritual. Gentiles, who were ritually unclean, needed to do three things when they became proselytes: **They received circumcision as the mark of the covenant people; a sacrifice had to be made for the atonement of sin; and the proselytes had to undergo baptism to symbolize their cleansing from the stain of their past life.**

John, however, was not urging Gentiles to repent and be baptized; he was **virtually demanding** that the Jews be baptized. But they were Jews! They were not supposed to need baptizing. After all, they had the priests who made daily, weekly, and yearly sacrifices for them. **Why did they need baptism?** Barclay further points out that “John’s baptism made sure that the Jews realized that to be a Jew in the racial sense was not to be a member of God’s chosen people” (*Barclay, Mark, p. 14*). John denounced this kind of nationalism, **“Do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham” (Luke 3:8)**. Robert Guelich states: “Repentance connoted **much more** than sorrow or remorse. It included the **reorientation** of one’s total life ... baptism was both an acknowledgment of one’s sins and one’s desire to repent and an acknowledgment of God’s acceptance of that repentance. The ultimate goal of repentance and baptism was (and is) the forgiveness of sins and acceptance by God in the coming day of salvation” (*Guelich, Mark, page 26*).

In the New Testament, baptism became the primary rite of Christian initiation. It **symbolized** death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–4). It **symbolized** washing, regeneration, and renewal (*Titus 3:5*). **Spiritually**, it is a work of the Holy Spirit based on what Christ has done through his own baptism of death.

The meaning of baptism in the New Testament is given by three Old Testament types: the flood (*1 Pet. 3:19–20*), the Red Sea (*1 Cor. 10:1–2*), and circumcision (*Col. 2:11–12*). These three types show us the different aspects of baptism. The **flood and the Red Sea** linked **death** and **redemption**, as does baptism into Christ’s **death** and **resurrection**. It is a symbol that a **person has died and is raised to new life**. It is God’s act of judgment and grace—**judgment upon the old nature** that has been crucified with Christ and grace with the **bestowal of the new nature**. **Circumcision** represented the divine covenant between God and Abraham. This act set aside Abraham and the Israelites as particularly chosen by God. They became a peculiar community, characterized by their obedience to God. **Baptism is a sign that we have been adopted into a new community, a new family, and we are characterized by our obedience to God through Jesus Christ.**

Mark states that Jesus was baptized by John. We know that Jesus did not need to repent. He had no sin from which to be cleansed. **Why was he baptized?** Barclay (*Mark*, p. 19) makes note of four reasons. First is the launching of Jesus' ministry. Second, it revealed God's approval. Third, at his baptism the Holy Spirit descended upon him, equipping him for the task ahead. Fourth, Jesus identified himself with sinful humanity.

G. W. Bromiley believes that **identification with sinners is the true baptism**: "This identification with sinners in judgment and renewal is what Jesus accepts when he comes to the baptism of John and fulfills when he takes his place between two thieves on the cross. Here we have the real baptism of the New Testament, which makes possible the baptism of our identification with Christ and underlies and is attested by the outward sign ... Christ has died and risen again in our place, so that we are dead and alive again in him, with him, and through him" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 113).

### **BAPTIZED WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT (Mark 1:8)**

The baptism with the Holy Spirit was originally identified with judgment. John the Baptist was warning of coming judgment, of a purification that was both personal and national in nature. As Robert Alan Cole notes, "God's intervention, that was to result in the establishment of his rule upon earth, was at the very doors." Jesus Christ, the coming one John referred to, ushered in the age of grace and judgment. Jesus stated this himself in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry. He took the Book of Isaiah and read from it: ***'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor'*** (Luke 4:18–19) (Cole, *Mark*, p. 58).

This is the age of grace. Of course, the scroll from Isaiah did not stop with those words. It continues, ***"And the day of vengeance of our God"*** (Isa. 61:2). While Jesus did not fulfill these words with his first coming, he will with his second coming. John the Baptist warned of a radical, fiery purification. The alternative he offered was to accept his baptism in water as a symbol of total repentance and reformation of life.

### **THE SACRIFICIAL SERVANT (Mark 1:9–11)**

<sup>9</sup> *At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.* <sup>10</sup> *Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.* <sup>11</sup> *And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

**1:9.** We see in **verses 1–8** John had been preparing the people for the coming of the sacrificial servant. He had declared that the coming Messiah would be “mightier” than himself—one whose sandal thong he was not worthy to untie. Yet, with such a great declaration Mark showed Jesus entering public life as a servant, without great fanfare. Mark tells us that Jesus came **from Nazareth in Galilee**. The people being baptized for the most part were from Jerusalem, the center of the religious life of Israel. One would think the Messiah would come from there. Yet, Mark, in keeping with his theme of the sacrificial servant, has Jesus coming from a remote village of no reputation in Galilee. Jesus was **baptized by John** not because he needed to repent of sin but to **identify** himself with sinful humanity (**2 Cor. 5:21**) and to **give approval** to John’s ministry.

**1:10–11.** After Jesus was baptized, three key events happened in quick succession. The first two appear together where Jesus **saw heaven being torn open** and **the Spirit descending on him like a dove**. Mark describes that the heavens are torn as one might imagine a bolt of lightning tearing heavens fabric. Not opened, torn, so it cannot return to its former state. Not the Jordon being parted this time but the heavens being torn open. It may be a sign of our access to God but Garland suggests that “more accurate than referring to our access to God would be to speak of God’s access to us. God comes whether we (like it) or not. The barriers between heaven and earth are torn down and torn open, and God is now in our midst and on the loose. The first request of **Isaiah 64:1** “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down” has come to pass.

And the descent of power from heaven that inaugurates God’s reign does not swoop down like an eagle or a falcon but **comes quietly and gently like a hovering dove**. The same Spirit of **Genesis 1:2** that once hovered over the primeval waters now descends on Jesus showing that a new creation had begun for the beginning of the gospel is also the **beginning of a new creation that transforms humanity**. Jesus saw the heavens open and the Spirit descend. The descent of the Spirit was **like a dove**. The dove is usually a symbol of gentleness, possibly contrasting the ministry of Jesus as a gentle servant who **brought healing and restoration with the ministry of John, who proclaimed judgment in no uncertain terms**. Whatever else the descent of the Spirit on Jesus meant; it clearly indicated his anointing and empowerment for ministry. Jesus himself proclaimed this anointing in the synagogue in Nazareth (**Luke 4:18**) when he said, **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me.”**

The third event happened shortly after the Spirit descended. Mark says the Father spoke to his Son by saying, **You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased**. *Here are some thoughts for consideration from Garland:* In the Old Testament, God is delighted in Israel when Israel is obedient. What the Scriptures ascribe to Israel, Mark **transfers to Jesus** as an agent on a special mission. The phrase may also be an allusion of another biblical “beloved son” – Isaac, whom Abraham offered up (**Gen 22:3, 18**). As well, the Father’s response joins the concept of the messianic king of the coronation in **Psalms 2:7** and that of the Lord’s Servant of the prophet in **Isaiah 42:1**. **The main emphasis is on the unique sonship of Jesus**. The announcement reflects **God’s divine choice of Jesus** for an eschatological work. Mark

opened his Gospel (1:1) by **confessing** that Jesus was the Son of God. Here, the Father himself **now proclaimed** Jesus as **his Son** and expressed **his approval**. This event in a remote place in the Judean wilderness has **cosmic significance**. Here is a remarkable picture of **interaction** by the **Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**.

### **PRINCIPLES to REMEMBER in MARK 1:1-11**

Mark begins with a banner headline: ‘The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God’. **We know exactly who he believes Jesus to be and this is good news**. This is the theme of his Gospel although many characters in the Gospel will not understand the truth. The rest of the Gospel expounds this belief through narrative, and through the teachings of Jesus. The story we will end with is a Roman soldier making the same statement (**Mark 15:39 ‘surely this man was the Son of God!’**).

The scene is set with the appearance of John the Baptist whose sole purpose is to point to someone more powerful than himself (**v. 7**). Cast in the role of Elijah, he prepares the way both as a road builder (**v. 3**) and as a baptizer (**vv. 4–5**). Those who came to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, will have made this proclamation at baptism. **It is fitting that this Gospel begins with the rite of baptism and with the promise of the Spirit which enables people to follow Christ in obedience**. Once Jesus is baptized, the heavenly voice confirms his identity (**v. 11**) and immediately the Spirit-filled Jesus is driven into the desert to wrestle with Satan.

### **AUTHOR PROFILE**

- Tradition holds that Mark is the author of this Gospel.
- Jewish; born in Jerusalem, probably from a well-to-do family. His mother, Mary, had a large house that was a meeting place for believers and they had servants (**Acts 12:12–16**).
- He was Barnabas’s cousin, and he went on the first missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas.
- Mark deserted Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. He was restored by Barnabas who did not go with Paul on the second missionary journey.
- Very close to the apostle Peter who may have been the one who led Mark to Christ.
- Fully restored to service as indicated by Paul, who nearing the end of his life, said that Mark was useful for service and asked Mark to come see him.

### **MARK’S GOSPEL LETTER PROFILE**

- Mark was written for Gentile readers.
- Mark presents Jesus as the ultimate servant.
- Mark emphasizes what Jesus did rather than what he said. The word *immediately* is used over forty times to show Christ as a servant of “action.”

- Eighteen miracles (over half of Christ's thirty-five recorded miracles) are in the Book of Mark.
- Mark is the earliest and shortest of the Gospels.
- Some consider that Mark recorded the recollections of Peter about Jesus' life.
- **Chapters 1–8** center on Christ's ministry to the multitudes.
- Mark devotes almost as many chapters to the last week of Christ's life (six chapters) as he does to the prior three years of ministry (eight chapters).
- Key verse to summarize Mark's message is **10:45**.

### **QUESTIONS for APPLICATION**

- Who is Jesus? How would we describe him?
- Is he good news for the people among whom we live?
- How can we, as a believing community, make him known?
- Mark has John the Baptist making preparations. Does the Christian message need some basic spadework today? Does the ground need leveling? How can we do it?
- Why does Mark omit to tell us about the birth and boyhood of Jesus? Is it more important to begin with baptism?
- What is our policy on baptism? Are we ready to turn people away or invite them to share the good news?
- Are we a Spirit-filled people in whom God is well pleased?
- Are we ready for the struggle with the forces of evil?
- Can we walk into a spiritual desert, armed with God's Spirit, and face...?