

Mark 1:4-11

4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

There is no need for any background information today because you know the story very well. It has been covered extensively and is also found in Matthew and Luke. The first time that I actually took the time to read the Bible, when I got to the Gospel of Mark I thought this is déjà vu; it seems like I have already read this. That's because there is a lot of parallelism between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Because of this I encourage people that are about to read the Bible for the first time to start with Luke, that way you don't get confused trying to compare the synoptic Gospels. When you get to the end then go to Genesis. I find that the Old Testament is much more interesting when you see how it connects to the New Testament. There is a golden thread woven through the Bible. It is a thread of covenant - God's relationship with humanity - that binds the books of the Bible together. The Bible is all about the relationship between God and humanity and how God ratifies the covenant with Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark starts off with John the Baptist, a wild and radical preacher man. Many people might think that he was doing something new and unique when he was baptizing people. However, baptism already existed. It was different but similar to what we know today. When John was in the river baptizing, people didn't ask "John, what on earth are you doing?" They knew what he was doing because the ritual of immersion that existed in Judaism existed before the advent of Christ. The Jewish ritual of immersion was for purity. Before you could go to worship in the temple, you had to do this ritual of immersion. It was not for hygiene or cleanliness; it was for spiritual purity. The people had to be pure before they could go in the presence of the deity. Then they could worship and offer a sacrifice. They would immerse themselves and then emerge purified. This comes from Old Testament cleansing rituals to get people purified so that they could present themselves to God.

John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He continues the tradition of spiritual cleansing to prepare people, get them ready, to worship God and offer their sacrifices to God. Worshiping God was a very special occasion whereupon people looked their best and were on their best behavior. Some contemporary examples of presenting yourself in the best way possible might be dressing up for the prom, or a wedding, funerals, honorarium dinners, and award ceremonies. For special occasions people dress their very best; they wear formal attire, are on their very best behavior, and everything goes according to protocol. So, John the Baptist is getting people ready for the presence of deity through the Jewish ritual immersion for purity. Before people could go to worship they had to this ritual of immersion. It was not for hygiene or cleanliness but for spiritual purity.

The Scripture is specific, John is baptizing for the forgiveness of sins. This is specifically for spiritual purification; a change of heart, attitude, and behavior. Along with baptism comes repentance and a promise of devotion to God's will, and then they are ready to go into the temple. With John's spiritual cleansing mechanism (to get people in a position to be able to present themselves in the temple) large volumes of people came to him to be baptized. The Scripture tells us that the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem came to him to be baptized. So, most of the people were going out to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River and they were confessing their sins. Virtually everybody knew what baptism was and they all wanted to be a part of it because they were very well familiar with their history. God cared for them post slavery and post exile just like the scriptures said it would happen before, during, and after it happened.

This is the setting that Jesus comes into. John is in front of a large crowd that is eager for his ritual of spiritual cleansing and proclaimed in front of this large crowd that there is one coming after him that is more powerful than he is and is much more worthy. Not only that but while I baptize you with water for spiritual cleansing, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. You can't get any more powerful than that. People are eager to be cleansed with the water by John but to be cleansed by the Holy Spirit is a very big deal. So we see in the gospels from the proclamation of John the Baptist that some of his followers begin to follow Jesus. In fact large crowds begin to follow Jesus because this is a big deal. The testimony by John is that with Jesus you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit.

Then the author of Mark gives his testimony. Mark, like the other Gospels, sets out to prove that Jesus is the promised Messiah. More importantly Jesus is the Son of God. Mark testifies that the heavens tore apart. Now this is very dramatic and serious. And a spirit descending like a dove on him, This is a sign of God. And a voice came from heaven saying "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark's testimony is this is the Son of God and the greatest testimony of all is that it is verified by a voice from heaven. The verification that this is the son of God actually comes from God.