

December 6, 2020

## Prepare the Way



**Malachi 3:1-4; Mark 1:1-8**

### Central Question

How can I prepare to encounter Christ?

### Scripture

#### Malachi 3:1-4

1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

#### Mark 1:1-8

1 The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; 3 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" 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."

### Reflecting

When I was a student at Texas A&M University, the campus received an exhaustive facelift. For months, workers filled potholes, power-washed buildings, and planted new flowers. Buses that had probably not been washed since they entered the fleet were thoroughly scrubbed. Everything was either cleaned, repaired, or replaced. Campus had never looked better. Why all the preparations? On November 6, 1997, every living US president and a number of foreign dignitaries arrived on campus for the dedication of the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library. Important guests require significant preparations.

Our passages today speak of the preparations needed to get ready for a guest more important than any earthly leader. God is on the way. The prophet Malachi doubts that the people of Judah are ready. The people in his day doubted that God would ever show up. They had grown apathetic in their preparations for the divine arrival. Fortunately, he tells of a messenger who will come and announce that God is on the way so that we might ready ourselves.

Mark's Gospel begins by drawing on Malachi's text and a similar one in Isaiah to announce that the messenger has arrived in the person of John the Baptist. John's words alerted his hearers to the fact that God would soon show up in the person of Jesus.



What preparations are you making for Christmas—not for the arrival of out-of-town guests, etc., but for Christ to take up residence within you in a new way?

How does one get ready for the Lord's arrival? While our temptation might be to straighten up our house, the prophets of the Bible call us to ready our hearts through humility and repentance. An important guest is on the way. It's time to prepare our hearts to receive him.

### Studying

*Malachi 3:1-4.* Malachi was one of the last books written in the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophet directed his message toward the people who had returned from the Babylonian exile and now worshiped at the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. The people had been back long enough for the excitement of their homecoming to fade. Progress in rebuilding had slowed. As the improvements they hoped to see failed to materialize, they became disinterested in their worship.

Malachi's prophecy unfolds with a series of discourses aimed at stirring the people to greater faithfulness in their corporate worship and their daily lives. In each of these discourses, the prophet makes a statement that is followed by a question and then a response (Nogalski, 994). Early in the book, Malachi rebuts the people's complaints against God. They question God's love and God's commitment to bringing justice. In today's passage, the prophet turns the tables by taking aim squarely at God's people. Though the people question God's faithfulness, Malachi doubts they genuinely want to encounter God.

Malachi begins with the statement that God is about to appear. First, God will send a messenger to prepare a way for God's own arrival (v. 1). Then, God will appear in power and might. Malachi doubts the people are ready for such an encounter. They have been living as if what they do doesn't matter. He wonders out loud about what will happen on the day God shows up. These doubts bring forth the question,



What keeps you from seeking God wholeheartedly?

Do the preparations of Christmas help or hinder you in doing this?

"Who can endure God's appearing?" (v. 2). The obvious answer is that no one will be able to stand on that day. God's holiness will overwhelm them because of their sinfulness.

The prophet clarifies why God will come to be with the people. God's presence will be like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap (v. 2). As a smelter burns away the impurities in precious metals, God's holiness will burn away people's sins. Harsh fuller's soap bleaches raw wool and makes it suitable for fabric. God will start with the priests, refining them again and again until they are once more capable of offering the appropriate sacrifices to God (v. 3).

This image of fiery renewal is at once redemptive and threatening. God will redeem Judah. God will not let the people remain in their sinfulness. God will work in and through the priests until the people will be able to please the Lord as they did in the past (v. 4). But the process is bound to hurt.

*Mark 1:1-8.* Centuries after Malachi, Mark uses the prophet's words as a bridge from the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures to the ministry of Jesus. Mark begins his work with the title "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God" (1:1). The word translated "good news" borrows the language sometimes used to announce military victories or the birth of Roman emperors (Culpepper, 42). Instead of announcing the birth



The words quoted in Mark 1:2-3 are a composite of Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1, and Isaiah 40:3. The three passages share key words, and each of the three can be seen as illuminating aspects of John's role as the forerunner. Exodus 23:20 promises the protection of Israel in the conquest of Canaan. The Greek word "angel" can also mean "messenger." Malachi 3:1 contains the announcement that the Lord will send a messenger of the covenant to the temple to purify the descendants of Levi. Malachi identifies this messenger as the prophet Elijah, so Mark understands that John the Baptist is the fulfillment of the expectation of the return of Elijah before "the great and terrible day of the Lord" (cf. Mal 4:5; Mark 9:11-13). (Culpepper, 44)

of a new Caesar, however, Mark's words anticipate the arrival of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

A combination of texts from Exodus, Malachi, and Isaiah set the stage for God's arrival. Mark may confuse modern readers by attributing these verses just to the prophet Isaiah. Some argue that the single attribution shows the importance of Isaiah in Mark's understanding of Jesus' ministry (Dowd, 9-10).

Whatever Mark's reason for mentioning only Isaiah, his larger point is clear: the prophecies of old are about to come true in Jesus Christ. Like a memorable quotation onscreen at the start of a movie, these verses remind people of God's ancient promise to send a messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. Immediately after, John the Baptist appears.

John's strange clothes and odd diet recall the ministry of Elijah (see 2 Kgs 1:7-8). Some believed Isaiah's vision of a new day would be ushered in with the coming of a prophet like Elijah (see Mal 4:5-6; Mark 9:11-13).

Others, drawing from Malachi's texts, were on the lookout for a renewal of Israel's priesthood. John himself is from a priestly family (Luke 2:5-25, 57-66). Consistent with Malachi's vision, John acts as a purified priest who prepares the way for the Lord by calling people to repent of their sins. John had no official religious status, but he spoke powerfully of how to be made right with God.

John's ministry introduces calls for baptism as an act of repentance. Water rituals for the forgiveness of sins weren't unheard of in John's day. The Essenes, a Jewish sect committed to spiritual renewal through austere practices, observed a similar kind of baptismal cleansing. Apart from the Essenes, baptism was generally reserved as a rite for Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism. Most Jews would have considered baptism inappropriate for them. They were already a part of God's family and had little need to re-identify with God's people. Still, John's message

resonated with the crowds. People from throughout the Judean countryside came to hear John preach. Many confessed their sins and were baptized in the Jordan River.

John's words indicate that he thought of his ministry as one of preparation. His baptism was not a final or even decisive act of repentance. Rather, it was a way to anticipate one far more powerful who was soon to arrive (v. 7). John's baptism in water was symbolic of a heart that longed to be made right with God. The one who was to come would baptize with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). To be baptized with God's very Spirit is to be transformed indeed!

### *Understanding*

Today's passages help us understand the connections between the Hebrew Scriptures and the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus. Throughout Israel's history, the people of God alternated between seasons of faithful worship and seasons in which they struggled to stay faithful. Though prophets like Malachi called the people back to God in their present day, they also anticipated a day when God would appear in a decisive way, bringing an end to the cycle of sin in the lives of God's people.

Mark's Gospel announces that God's decisive act has occurred in the person of Jesus Christ. One of the signs of God's arrival is found in the ministry of the forerunner, John the Baptist. Mark asserts that he is the messenger of whom Malachi and the other prophets spoke.

John's message offers as an important word about what it means to prepare for the Lord's arrival. Like the people in John's day, we also need to repent of our sins.



At the heart of sin is the belief that we don't need God. Repentance involves confessing our sins. It is how we respond when we recognize our need for salvation. Even more, repentance involves turning from self-sufficiency toward a life of dependence on God. John preached a message of repentance to point people toward faith in Jesus.

But repentance is not an act of self-cleansing. Instead, it is a surrendering of our will to the one who can truly change our hearts. John announced that someone was coming who was far more powerful than he was. True cleansing comes not from the act of repentance or from baptism but from Christ himself.

### *What About Me?*

- *What part of my life needs to be turned over to Christ?* Malachi and John the Baptist both anticipate a day in which God shows up decisively. They imagine God's arrival as having the potential to terrify as well as comfort. If God were to show up in your life today, how would you respond? Would God's presence terrify you or comfort you? What areas of your life might emerge in God's presence as needing attention? What would it look like to turn those areas over to Christ?
- *Where could I use a second chance?* Repentance is not simply about getting right with God. It is also about being made right by God. Are there areas of your life where you sometimes feel guilt or shame? Do you believe that God can cleanse you from guilt and shame in these areas? Ask God to cleanse you from these sins—right now if you're ready. Take a moment to imagine yourself the way God sees you as a result of divine forgiveness.
- *Who in your life needs to hear about the good news of Jesus?* Mark writes his Gospel with the goal of telling people the good

news of Jesus. What about you? How do you let other people know about Jesus—who he is and what he has done for you? Take a moment to think of one person who needs to hear your story. Pray for that person. Ask God to help you find the words and the courage to express to them what Jesus' love has meant to you.

### Resources

Alan Culpepper, *Mark*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007).

D. S. Dockery, "Baptism," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

Sharon Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel*, Reading the New Testament (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000).

James D. Nogalski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2011).



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