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THE ACTION GOSPEL

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The book of Isaiah gives us an idea of what the gospel will do:

³ *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

⁴ *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:*

The gospel is like a bulldozer, carving a highway out of the wilderness. We're going to study Mark's gospel observe this bulldozer *in action*.

Action! Action is the key element of Mark's gospel. As we study Mark, you will see words like *immediately* and *straightway*. You will see eighteen of Jesus' miracles but only four of his parables. Mark's descriptions are very candid and down to earth. He doesn't beat around the bush! His Greek style is very much the common man's Greek—it would be as if we wrote a book with things in it such as, "Dude, that was *way* stupid!" He likes to point out people's gut reactions; watch as he uses words like *amazed* and *astonished*.

There are a couple of things we should know before we start. First, Mark was probably the earliest of the four gospels, and appears to have been used as source material for both Matthew and Luke. In fact, of the 661 verses in Mark, we find over 600 of them in either Matthew or Luke, or both!¹ Second, Mark appears to be writing from the perspective of Peter. Peter refers to him as "my son" (I Pet. 5:13), probably meaning that Peter had led him to the Lord. Since Mark was not a disciple, he got the information for his gospel from the disciples, and most of that probably came from Peter. He also spent much time with Paul and Barnabas.²

The last bit of introductory material concerns Mark's audience. For whom did he write this gospel, and why? The Gospel of Mark was written to early Gentile Christians in Rome. The Roman Christians were being persecuted, and Mark wrote his gospel to reassure them about their Master. Mark therefore portrays Jesus as the perfect servant, who, under the Father's authority, has limitless authority of his own. You see, any Roman could identify with this picture of Christ. Romans either had servants, or were servants themselves, or were freemen who had contact with other men's servants. They knew what a servant was and how a servant was supposed to act. Jesus is the perfect Servant. In fact, the key verse of Mark is found in chapter 10: "*For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister; and to give his life a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45). That is why Mark shows Christ in action, acting both *under* authority and *with* authority; and His actions are based on both justice and love.

¹ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983).

² Although Paul apparently thought of John Mark as a quitter at one point (Acts 15:36–41), he saw value in him later in his ministry (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Have you ever wondered, though, why we have more than one gospel? The reason is that each one gives is a different perspective of the same Person. The multiple viewpoints give depth and dimension. They explain the same things but in slightly different ways, just as many instruments can play the same piece, adding harmony and fullness and dimension that just aren't possible with one instrument alone.

Now that we are equipped with this basic background information, let us open our Bibles to the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, verse 1.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God;

I think most of us have been in church long enough to know that the word gospel means “good news.” Mark did not make up this word; it already existed, but for a different purpose. To the Romans, the word gospel meant “good news” about their emperor. Mark’s gospel is of a different nature: it is the good news of the King of kings, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. God is the Emperor, not of this world, but of the universe, and Mark is going to relate to us the good news about His Son, Jesus—the Son who willingly laid aside His majesty and took the form of a Servant.

Notice that there are three parts to His name: Jesus (as a man), Christ (the Messiah, God’s special Agent), and the Son of God (as deity). In this one brief verse, Mark affirms that Jesus is both man and God, and has a special mission—and that special mission is the good news!

Notice also that Mark states that this is the beginning of the gospel; in Mark’s mind, where does the gospel story begin? It begins with *witnesses*. Let’s look at the next few verses together:

² *As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.*

³ *The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*

⁴ *John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.*

Mark’s gospel begins in the Old Testament, with a prophecy about a messenger who would come before the Messiah. Now, this prophecy that Mark records here is actually two prophetic passages compressed together as one package. This sort of thing was very common in Hebrew literature, and we find it in other places in the New Testament as well; yet it invariably causes Bible critics to yell, “Foul!” It’s not a foul. It’s a recognition that the two prophets were speaking with one voice. In this case, the prophet Malachi had said, “*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me*” (Malachi 3:1). Isaiah had said, “*The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a **highway** for our God*” (Isaiah 40:3). So the first witnesses of the gospel are two prophets from long ago.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begins with a message brought by another witness, whose name is John. Warren Wiersbe records, “In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. This included both repairing the roads and preparing the people. By calling the nation to repentance, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ.”³

³ Warren Wiersbe, *Be Diligent* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1987), 11.

I want you to think for a moment about how such preparation was vital to Jesus' mission. Here's John, out in the wilderness, baptizing and preaching repentance. Now, I want to tell you, that wilderness is still to this day a barren, desolate, harsh place. And the Jordan River, then as now, has a reputation for being a fast-running, mud carrying river. Yet into this wilderness people came, and into this river people were baptized. Why? Look at verse 5:

And there went out unto him all the land of Judaea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized of him in the river of Jordan, confessing their sins.

Mark is painting with a very broad brush here in using the word *all*; but it's patently clear that there was a tremendous move of God going on out in the wilderness. This was a big deal. Everyone knew about it and very, very many went to see for themselves.

I'll tell you why. Actually, Mark already has told us: John's message was one of repentance for the remission of sins. His message resonated with the deepest need of mankind—the need for *forgiveness*, of being right with God and with our fellow man. How we do yearn for that!

We often imagine John out there in the wilderness, thundering against sin; but if that were all he did, he would have had very few listeners. No, the wilderness itself was a metaphor for the condition of mankind, harsh and desolate. John's words found a home in the harsh, desolate hearts of the hearers because they already knew their condition but didn't know what to do about it. *John told them what to do about it.* The gospel makes a highway in the wilderness of our hearts—knocking down the mountains of pride, filling in the valleys of self-torment, and straightening out the crooked ways and deceitfulness.

You see, the people of John's day are no different than the people of ours. We live in a world broken by sin. As we grow older, apart from God, we see the harshness and the barrenness more and more in our own lives (and I suspect that is why Hollywood and the popular culture make it their business to destroy youthful innocence as early and as often as possible: their own lives are so miserable that they *cannot* allow children remain to children.) The condition is brought about by three things, three terrible things, that lurk in the hearts of every man and woman: sin, guilt, and fear. These are the universal experience of mankind.

Sin is that self-centeredness that lies at the root of so much of what we do. It takes the natural love that God gave us and twists it so that its highest goal is to please ourselves instead of to please God. And in pleasing ourselves selfishly, we destroy so much of what is good in our lives. We hurt others, very often the ones we say that we love the most, with our self-serving ways and words. Sin is selfishness.

Sin produces two things: guilt and fear. It produces guilt because we know that we hurt others and we hate ourselves for it. We carry the guilt and the shame and the self-loathing because we know that we have done wrong. Sin produces fear as well. In fact, we see this fear very clearly in the record of the first sin, way back in the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve hid from God—the very One who loved them more perfectly than they could imagine. They had hurt Him, and they knew it; and in their guilt and shame, they misjudged God's love toward them, and they hid.

This sin and guilt and shame had produced a wilderness in the hearts of the people of Judea and Jerusalem, and that is why they went to hear John speak of repentance for the remission, that is, the removal or forgiveness, of sin.

Do you see this? Forgiveness is half of the message; but what is the other half? Repentance! We often have this skewed idea of forgiveness that it is something we give when someone asks for it; but forgiveness actually begins before that. God the Father forgave us long before we asked, just as the father of the prodigal son in Luke 15 had forgiven his son long before he asked. We often think, “Well, you know, I’d forgive that person if he’d just ask.” Nope. Forgive now, and leave the rest to that person.

That is where *repentance* comes into play. If someone has hurt me, and I’ve forgiven him in my own heart, then that’s all I can do until that person comes to receive the forgiveness. If he doesn’t receive it, he’ll be carrying around the guilt and the shame just as that prodigal son had done. If you don’t know the story of the prodigal son, I encourage you to read Luke 15 today. *Forgiveness is a change in relationship, but repentance is a change of heart*: “You must change your mind, stop justifying it, admit that it was hurtful, and then the pardon can be received, forgiveness can be applied.”⁴ That is what was happening out in that wilderness: people were finding forgiveness and repentance. Their hearts were being healed. They were recognizing what was wrong in their lives and were finding how to get it right.

Let’s continue with the next few verses:

⁶ *And John was clothed with camel’s hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey;*

⁷ *And preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose.*

⁸ *I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.*

Do you wonder why Mark put this description here? Think of it this way: could a person possibly have a more simply set of clothing? No. There is nothing of fashion here at all. This is bare necessity. Could a person have a more simple diet? No. I mean, it’s basic protein and carbohydrates. Others have pointed out before that this simplicity is meant to be a reflection of the whole message. John stands at the beginning of the gospel, clad in basic clothing and eating basic food and sharing a very basic message, the message of repentance. The gospel starts with repentance.

Now, that is not where it ends, and John makes it clear that there is more to come. John, in all his mannerisms and lifestyle, represents the beginning; but there is more to the gospel than just the beginning! John acknowledged that he could only baptize people outwardly; but the One who would come after Him, the One so great that John was not even worthy to remove His sandals, would baptize them inwardly with the Holy Spirit of God!

I want to close with these words from a pastor who has since gone on to be with the Lord:

John brought people to Christ by the only way man can come—through acknowledgment of guilt. When people come this way, God meets them, cleanses them, and forgives them. John demonstrated that by the baptism he performed. But there is a greater baptism—that of the Holy Spirit. And on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came, you find Peter standing up and offering people two things: forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the Spirit. From that

⁴ Ray Stedman, “The Place to Begin.” September 22, 1974. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/new-testament/mark/the-place-to-begin>.

time on, this is what God has made available to any man or woman who will begin at the beginning—the place of repentance.⁵

⁵ Ibid.