

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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The Beginning of the Gospel

by Dan Trygg

“Comfort, O comfort My people,’ says your God. ² ‘Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, ...her iniquity has been removed, ...she has received of Yahweh’s hand double for all her sins.’ ³ A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for Yahweh in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Let every valley be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; and let the rough ground become a plain, and the rugged terrain a broad valley; ⁵ then the glory of Yahweh will be revealed, and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.’” Isaiah 40:1-5

“Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,’ says Yahweh of hosts.” Malachi 3:1,2

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way; ³ the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”’ ⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” Mark 1:1-4

Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry starts out with “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”. The word, “gospel”, literally means “good-news”, so he was saying, “the beginning of the good news”. Good news? **Good news about what? About Jesus Christ, the Son of God.** This brief phrase is comprised of “buzz words”. The word, “Christ”, was *not* Jesus’ name. It was a title that was ascribed to Him. It literally meant, “anointed one”, and referred to the custom of anointing kings in Israel (I Sam. 10:1; 15:17; 16:13). “Christ” is from the Greek word, and “Messiah” is the Hebrew equivalent. “Son of God” is a similar title. King David was called both God’s anointed-one and His son in Psalm 2 (vss. 2,7,12). God adopted him as His son when He made him king. To call Jesus the “Christ, the Son of God” meant that Mark was declaring Him to be God’s appointed Messianic-King over the people of God. The “good news”, or the “gospel” is *centered on Jesus*. The good news is about *Him*.

What makes *Jesus* to be good news? To lay the groundwork, Mark begins his presentation by alluding to two OT passages. The first one was from Malachi 3:1, and the other from Isaiah 40:3. (As was the common practice of his time, Mark cited the connection to Isaiah, but did not name Malachi as a source. Isaiah was a major prophet, the first and longest of the prophetic books. To mention his name was like referencing the entire collection of prophetic books. Malachi, by contrast, was considered a “minor prophet”, and was often not cited by name.) Here, the quote from Malachi sounds similar to the passage from Isaiah, but it adds the idea of “the messenger” whom God will send to prepare the way before Him. Isaiah mentions the idea of preparing the way before the Lord, but has no mention of “the messenger”. Together they make a more complete picture. **The importance of putting these two prophetic passages together is to show that centuries before God had prophesied *not only* about His *Messianic-King*, but *also* about a messenger who would come before Him and prepare the way for Him. Who is this messenger? Mark indicates that it was John the Baptist.** When they asked John who he was, he replied by quoting Isaiah 40:3, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’”(Jn. 1:23). Malachi wrote 400 years before John showed up on the scene, and Isaiah had prophesied an additional 300 years before that! Yet, Mark points out how *both of these prophecies were fulfilled in John the Baptist*. He was the voice crying the wilderness. He was the messenger who came before the Messianic-King, to prepare the way before Him.

What does it mean to prepare the way for the Lord? There are two very different scenarios described in the OT for preparing for God’s coming. In Amos 4:6-12, God confronts arrogant and self-satisfied Israel, who were oppressing the poor, and crushing the needy. They were about to be judged, delivered over to their enemies and taken captive into distant lands. He described all the things He has done to try to get their attention, to show them that they were outside of His blessing, to motivate them to seek His face, and return to the covenant relationship they had with Him as His people. These were things spelled out *centuries before* as the consequences of sin and disloyalty to God (Deut. 28:15-68). ...He let them experience famine, yet they did not return to Him; He withheld the rain from them, yet they did not return to Him; He allowed scorching wind, mildew and insects destroy their crops, yet they did not return to Him; He sent a plague to slay their young men and horses, yet they did not return to Him; He overthrew their cities, and made them like Sodom and Gomorrah, and then snatched them like a brand from the fire, yet they *still* did not return to Him. After listing all these things, God says He will *continue* to do these kinds of things, until they respond. In fact, it was about to get a whole lot worse! **He warns them, “Prepare to meet your God!!”** Obviously, this is a warning of judgment. **You don’t want to meet God when He comes in judgment! This is, however, an important aspect of who God is, and the reality of our relationship with Him.** He created us. He has expectations of us,

and He will hold us accountable for how we behave. This should come as no surprise. It has been this way all of our lives. Our parents had expectations, boundaries, rewards and praise for good behavior, and painful consequences for bad behavior. When we become adults, it is no different. There are workplace expectations and consequences. There are civic or governmental laws, and our behavior can bring strong, heavy consequences on us. There are principles and rules for health, for prosperity in business or finances, for relationships with people. **The world is full of consequences. Consequences are woven into the fabric of our existence.** We can strike off on our own selfish way, but it won't be long before unpleasant, unhealthy consequences will be nipping at our heels. **The point of it all? God wants us to learn to be wise about life.** He wants us to learn from the examples of others, and the consequences we bring into our own lives. **More importantly, however, He wants us to learn to respect and honor Him, and to learn to abide by His values and purposes for things and people.** The recurring refrain in Amos was "they did not return to Him". That is what He wants! He doesn't want us to fight against Him, or the principles built into the world He has made. He doesn't want us to "kick against the goads", as He told Saul of Tarsus (Acts 26:14). **He wants us to turn and relent of our rebellion and selfishness, and acknowledge Him as God.** He wants us to turn back to the fellowship relationship He originally created for humankind. He will share with us His wisdom for true joy, success and fulfillment in life. We can learn from Him, or from the school of hard knocks. **If, however, we refuse, He is not going to back down.** Consequences, pain and disaster will continue to come. **We will have to stand before Him as our Judge, some day, and the stakes are high.** "Get ready. Here comes the Judge! Prepare to meet your God!"

There is an entirely different way to meet God, however. Instead of being compelled to stand before Him as a dreaded Judge, we can voluntarily know Him as our Comforter, Savior, Redeemer and Friend. This is the invitation extended to us in the Isaiah passage that Mark cites as the beginning of the "good news". **God speaks words of comfort to His people.** He speaks *kindly* to His people, saying that "**the warfare is over, their iniquity has been removed, Yahweh has provided 'double', ...abundantly more than enough..., to cover their sins**". **This is the good news!** Therefore, **the herald has been sent forth, the messenger, to proclaim the glad tidings, and to tell the people to get ready, because the King Himself is coming!** Those who *heard* the message, and *believed* it were to *prepare the way* for the coming King. In the natural world, when word went forth that a king was coming for a visit, his people were to fill in the pot holes, grade the roads, clean the streets, paint the fences and houses, hang ribbons and decorations and get ready to welcome him with joy and festivity. In a similar way, Isaiah and Malachi used this word picture to tell us that **we need to celebrate the wonderful news of His victory, His grace and the forgiveness He offers. We need to prepare for the coming of the Messianic King.**

How do we prepare the way for the Kingdom of God? John the Baptist proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. What does that mean? **Repentance is a change of perception. It is seeing things differently, and owning that new perspective.** In this case, it is seeing that I have not been living up to what God asks of me. It means recognizing that I have sinned, and that I have not been living for God, and then *purposing* to make a change. **Repentance is a change of mind, and a change of mindset.** Repentance would be to hear God's offer of forgiveness (the good news), and choose to embrace it. **Baptism was an immersion in water, ...symbolizing a washing away of sin, and a death and burial to the past, as well as a rising to a new, clean, consecrated life to God.** Baptism was a ritual applied to new converts to Judaism. For John to call his listeners, who were *already* Jews, to a "baptism of repentance", or "repentance's baptism", was tantamount to saying, "You need to start *over!* God is offering you forgiveness of sins, if you will only believe." **How could they show that they believed?** By humbling themselves as if they were a new convert, and choosing the baptism that is associated with repentance. God was extending grace to them. **To believe this good news, was to reach out and take God's offer of grace. To believe it, ...really believe it..., meant that you would do whatever it takes to show God that you are serious,** that you really want Him, His forgiveness and His plan for your life. It *starts* with a *change of perception*, repentance, ...followed by *faith*, a trust in this new perspective that leads to *action*, ...and the resulting action which John was preaching was *baptism*. That is the *first* outward act of obedience God asks of us. Thus, Peter wrote that baptism was "not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an *appeal* to God for a good conscience" (1 Pet. 3:21). The Greek could also be translated as "an *answer* to God *from* a good conscience". In either case, **baptism is the response of faith to the hope of salvation brought by the good news.**

It does not matter where we are in our relationship to God. **Our lives can become distracted, cluttered and out of sync with God.** God's good news of comfort is not just a future prophecy, as it was for Isaiah. **Jesus has indeed won the battle, Satan is defeated. Our sin has been removed by Christ's sacrifice, once for all. His grace is more than sufficient to cover every sin, and to empower us for every challenge.** God is calling us to Himself *today*, "Prepare your heart for Me. Straighten up what is crooked. Clear the way for Me to enter your heart and mind, and allow Me to lead you in life, vitality, hope and joy today." **Repent, ...and believe the gospel!**