

The Path of Missionary Service

Mark 1:1-8

By [Ed Hartman](#)

One of the pleasures of being invited to preach here is you get to pick all the hymns so you've just sung some of my favorites and we'll finish at the end of the service with the rich words of "Come We That Love the Lord," an invitation to go forth with joy and to celebrate as we sing. But between here and there, there's a calling. And we talked about that calling, the call to missionary service, last Sunday evening. We said very simply that if you belong to Christ you're not a guest in this world, you're a host. And this evening I'd like us to think about what that looks like. What will it feel like, what will it cost you, where will it take you to actually live as a host instead of as a guest. To that end, I'd like to invite you to turn to Mark chapter 1. Mark chapter 1. We'll read together the first eight verses and then we'll pray:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,

"Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This is God's Word. Let's bow together in prayer.

Holy Spirit, would You please come and work mightily within us and among us? Come upon us as a congregation, come upon me as the one who's called to preach Your Word this evening. Your Word is alive and powerful. Make it so in the experience of each one of us. Shape us, mold us, make us like the Lord Jesus. Build within us not just a deeper understanding of the truth but a greater love for it so that what we love truly shapes us and constrains us and frees us

from our fears and propels us forward. You've called us to missionary service. Now show us the path that You're calling us to walk by Your holy Word, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

What Does Following Christ Look Like?

Friday, eight of us left the church here and went to Knoxville to participate in the training event put on by Christianity Explored. It's a wonderful framework for presenting the Gospel to people who know the Lord Jesus, who don't know the Lord Jesus, or who really aren't sure "Who is Jesus? Why did He come? And what does it mean to follow Him?" And I begin there because the whole study, the whole framework for presenting the Gospel is done in a process of developing relationship as the gospel of Mark is studied. And so I thought it would be appropriate to start with the first eight chapters of Mark's gospel and unpack a little bit about what it means to follow the Lord Jesus as you pursue His call. Because my question is not, "Do you belong to Christ or are you an unbeliever?" My presumption is that if you are here tonight instead of somewhere else it's a pretty good chance that you believe yourself to be a follower of Jesus. Right? Safe assumption? What I'd like to do tonight is unpack with greater clarity what that looks like. In this training that we participated in, one of the statements that was made - and I should say that the Christianity Explored material began in England and so you have a lot of British perspective on who we are and how we think and how we function - one of the statements was made that we as Americans like to put the Gospel on sale. We lower the cost so that more people will buy.

Now I live here so I'm not entirely sure that that's true but let's presume that it might be and let's let Mark's gospel unpack really what following Jesus will require, what it will look like for us as individuals. Here's where we'll end this evening. Four statements - they're not explicitly stated but when we unpack the passage you'll see it's undeniably implicit in the passage. Number one, the Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go. Number two, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become. Number three, the Gospel will strip you of what you do not wish to let go. And fourth and most importantly, the Gospel will give you what you cannot live without. The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become, the Gospel will strip you, maybe even break you of what you do not wish to let go, and number four, the Gospel will give you what you cannot live without. So let's work our way through those statements.

I. The Gospel Will Take You Where You Do Not Wish To Go

Why The Wilderness?

Number one, the Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go. I've drawn those statements from four questions that we ask of the text. Number one, why does this begin in the wilderness? Mark's gospel is the only one that begins the way it does. The other three gospels begin with beginnings. Matthew and Luke beginning with the genealogies and the birth narratives; John going all the way back to the beginning of creation. Mark just, right out of the gate, begins with the action of John the Baptist preceding the coming of Jesus. And yet it's set in the wilderness. Why there? If you were going to start a new movement that was going to have worldwide applications, why begin in the wilderness? Well the wilderness of Judea, which you read about several times in this passage, verses 3 and 4, is not a thick, dense forest that we think of when we talk about the wilderness. Actually it's an arid, desolate place that you would avoid going to if that was at all possible. It was roughly three thousand feet lower in elevation making it a lot hotter and about twenty miles northeast of the city, the city of Jerusalem. It's not the same wilderness that we spoke of this morning in Exodus 14. It's the wilderness just outside of Jerusalem. Jerusalem as you know from the other gospels was the seat of power for the Jewish religious system. It was a place where people went to be safe, secure, and to celebrate. The wilderness was the antithesis of all this. The wilderness was dangerous, it was where wild animals were found; it was where fugitives went to avoid capture, it was where conflict occurred. It was a place where if you wanted to remain safe, comfortable, and secure you would never simply go.

And the wilderness also had a political reputation and a religious reputation. The religious reputation meant that if you wanted to get as far away from the priesthood, the sacrificial system, the temple, the rules, you would go to the wilderness. It was the place that was removed from all things religious in that ancient world. But it also had a political reputation because while Rome was powerful it was not unchallenged and history records for us at least seven different movements under the reign of Pontius Pilate - that was 26AD to 36AD - at least seven different movements that were crushed by the Roman army, each of which had the participants gathering in the wilderness. And so there was a profound reputation both religiously and politically about the wilderness. You simply did not want to be caught there and yet this is exactly where the Gospel begins back in Mark. Isaiah's prophecy puts it into sharp relief. Isaiah said it would be in the wilderness that the road for the Redeemer would be prepared.

The question is, "Why? Why the wilderness?" If you read Scripture you will find that there are two really dominant images that talk about our spiritual condition apart from Christ - one is the wilderness; the other is darkness. The wilderness is where Mark begins here. He talks about our spiritual state that is desolate, exposed, vulnerable, unprotected, unsecure, unsafe, lost, dark. And this is exactly where the prophet Isaiah said the Gospel would begin. The point is, the Gospel doesn't leave us in our protected places. The Gospel doesn't come to us when we're comfortable, when we think things are moving along just as we wish. The Gospel doesn't gain significance and meaning in my life when I'm

comfortably enjoying the beach. The place where the Gospel really grabs hold of my heart and speaks to the darkest recesses of my life is when I find myself in the wilderness. That's where Mark begins.

The Glory in the Wilderness

I wonder if you find yourself in a wilderness place today. I remember my mother when she was first diagnosed with her cancer she really wrestled with a lot of questions about what treatment options and which doctors and which facilities. And she quoted for me a verse from John chapter 21 verse 18 where Jesus is speaking to Peter. And He says to Peter, "When you were young you dressed yourself and you went wherever you wished, but when you were old, others will lead you where you do not wish to go." And my mother said, "I find myself in a wilderness, one I would never have chosen to go into, but one where I'm trusting the Lord to lead me through." If you find yourself in a wilderness place today, what we learn throughout Mark's gospel and frankly throughout the rest of Scripture, is while God invites us to pray, it's dangerous to demand that He remove us from the wilderness because more often than not He wants to reveal Himself to us in new and unprecedented ways.

As a matter of fact, if you read Hosea chapter 2, God speaks of His people in verse 13 and says, "She (my people) decked herself with rings and jewelry and went after her lovers but me she forgot," declares the Lord. "Therefore I am now going to allure her. I will lead her into the wilderness and there I will speak tenderly to her. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. In that day," declares the Lord, "you will call me 'My husband' and you will no longer call me 'My master.'" You see, the truth is, the Gospel will take us where we do not wish to go and if you take seriously the call to missionary service then the path of missionary service will take you through the wilderness. It will take you into places that you really have no desire to be in, places that you're pleading with the Lord to get you out of, and yet it's precisely there that He's going to use you in ways you never thought possible and reveal Himself to you in ways you've not yet discovered. The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go.

II. The Gospel Will Make of You What You Do Not Wish to Become

Why John?

Secondly, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become. I draw that conclusion by asking the question, "Why John? Why do we begin with John the Baptist here at the beginning of Mark's gospel?" Remember, John was the miracle child of elderly parents who were childless, who had gotten to the point where they realized, "We're probably not going to have kids." Remember that Zechariah, John's father, was among the elite number of priests who was chosen

to offer incense in the holy place of the temple. He was a respectable leader in the religious system and Elizabeth, his mother, was the one to whom the angel came in Luke chapter 1. And the angel said of this baby who would be born to these elderly parents, "He will be a joy and a delight to you and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Now imagine what high hopes Zechariah and Elizabeth had for their son. Their son was the promised one. He was the one for whom God's people had been waiting for seven hundred years since Isaiah made these promises of the one who would go forth before the Messiah making ready the way for His coming. Imagine what it was like to raise this little boy and to see him become a student in school and become educated and a young man.

An Odd and Unconventional Son

And then, verse 6. Notice how this one for whom they had such high hopes, look at how he's described in verse 6. "John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey, all in the wilderness." Who would have wanted that for their son? Now you know he was raised for the temple, he was raised by a prominent leader in the religious system. You know he was educated; you know he was on track to follow in his dad's footsteps. And yet at some point, John had intentionally separated himself from all the comforts and the privileges of his family and position. He abandoned what was accepted and conventional and even reasonable. He adopted clothing of the poorest people - camel's hair, a leather belt. And he was eating food that wasn't any more palatable than it would be now. Imagine eating big grasshoppers that squish when you stomp on them! This is who he's become. The promised one, the one who would be great, filled with the Holy Spirit, coming in the power of Elijah and look what he's become. Who would have chosen this? And then think it - John chapter 3 verse 30, he says of Jesus, "He must become greater; I must become less." The promised one. And then later he's in prison and in what appears to be real discouragement and disillusionment, he sends some of his disciples to Jesus and says, "Are you really the one or did I get it wrong? Should we expect another?" The loneliness of where he's ended up just before he's beheaded. The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go but the Gospel will also make of you what you do not wish to become.

A Chosen Vessel Always Fit For Use

I remember reading a Puritan prayer out of the Valley of Vision which includes these words. It says, "I bless you, O Lord, that You have veiled my eyes to the waters ahead. If you have appointed storms of tribulation, You will be with me in them. If a painful end is to be my lot, You will be with me and I can make no stipulation. Only glorify Yourself in me, whether in comfort or in trial, as a chosen

vessel always fit for Your use.” Elisabeth Elliot, once telling the story of what she had experienced, was met by a woman after she spoke and the woman said to her, “Oh Elisabeth, I can’t imagine going through what you’ve been through,” so which Elisabeth smiled and said, “Well of course you can’t because God doesn’t give you imagining grace; He only gives you necessary grace right at the appropriate time of need.” The truth is, it is a blessing that God veils our eyes to the waters ahead. You couldn’t handle what’s coming if He showed it all to you right now, could you? So in His mercy He tells you upfront - “I will make of you what you do not wish to become, but I will meet you there and I will use you in ways that right now are out of your reach.”

III. The Gospel Will Strip You of What You Do Not Wish To Let Go

Why Baptism?

The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become, third, the Gospel will strip you of what you do not wish to let go. I take that statement from the question, “Why baptism? Why is the word baptize or baptizing or baptism repeated five times at the beginning of Mark’s gospel? What’s the big deal?” This isn’t a passage that serves as the precedent for the mode of baptism or the manner in which it’s applied - whether it’s poured or sprinkled or you’re to be immersed. That’s not the point. For us to understand what’s going on here we have to ask ourselves, “What did this mean to a first century Jew?” And they were familiar with this. Because you see, whenever a Gentile decided that they wanted to embrace Judaism they would be circumcised and then ceremonially washed. That was the procedure with which they were familiar. It’s a picture of getting rid of what was unclean and the Jewish people understood that. Now to take that imagery and to apply it to a child of Abraham, a true follower of the Law of Moses, was a way of saying, “You need what every pagan needs. What you’ve always been clinging to, what you thought made you an insider with God, what you thought was going to get you through, what you thought was enough to put you right with God isn’t what you think it is. You’ve been hanging onto these things to declare, ‘This is my identity. I’m a child of Abraham. I keep the Law. I sacrifice. I memorize Torah. I do all these things.’” And calling them to be baptized was a way of saying, “You don’t have what you think you have. All those things to which you’ve been clinging for your identity, for your value, for your worth, you have to let go of just like the Gentile pagan does.”

Letting Go Of My Good

And then it comes into very sharp, clear focus, doesn’t it? Because the Gospel will strip you of what you do not wish to let go. If you’re like me there are places in your life that you look at and say, “If I didn’t have this, my life wouldn’t be worth living. I mean, this is what gives meaning to my life - I love my wife; I love my

kids. I love them. It would kill me to lose them. I have obedient kids. This is what makes me worthwhile. I'm a pastor. I'm an attorney. I'm a physician. I am a mother. Look at how well I care for my kids. Look at what a gracious host I am." And we cling to these things to say, "This is what gives me meaning. This is what defines me. This is what makes me a person of worth." And the more clearly you understand the Gospel the more it will unclench your white-knuckled grip from those things to which you and I cling to say, "This is what makes me who I am." Because God loves us He is determined to unclench our grip from anything to which we cling apart from Jesus to define who we are, to define our worth, our eternal worth because everything else is, at best, secondary. And so this message of baptism for repentance is not just saying, "I'm sorry for the bad that I've done," but it's also a letting go of the good to which we've been clinging for our worth and our identity and our fulfillment - those things upon which we base our own sense of self-righteousness.

IV. The Gospel Will Give You What You Cannot Live Without

You Never Leave the Gospel

The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become, the Gospel will strip you, maybe even break you of what you do not wish to let go, but finally and most importantly, the Gospel will give you what you cannot live without. And that's where Mark begins. He says, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He could have just as easily said, "Here's the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," but he didn't. He said, "The beginning, this is the beginning," because whenever you say "the beginning," what you're implying is, there's more to come. The beauty of the way Mark begins is this - you never leave the Gospel. You never look into the past to say, "Well, thirty years ago I embraced the Gospel and now I'm doing this." The Gospel is always in your present. The Gospel is always what you most need in this instant and you never move away from it, ever, because the moment you think you can you're going right back to shaping your own identity based on what you do, what you have, whom you know, and what you've accomplished. The beginning of the Gospel means that the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is yours. He's begun a great work in you. He's not just forgiven your sin and removed the guilt and shame but He declares over your life, "There is therefore now no condemnation;" you're no longer to blame. It's no longer your fault. Jesus became blamed, Jesus became shamed in your place so that He could declare you righteous and perfect and make you accepted in the Beloved, so much so that Charles Spurgeon put it this way - "Not even departed saints who are in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself are more accepted than you are right now because they, in the presence of Jesus, are accepted only in the Beloved as you and I are accepted today only in the Beloved." This is the Gospel. It is what is entirely yours, it is entirely mine, we never leave it, and it always, always shapes us and makes Jesus more precious to us.

This is what we celebrate. This is the core of who we are. This is what defines us and we never walk away from it. For all eternity in the presence of the Lamb and our brothers and sisters in Christ from across the world and across the ages, we will celebrate this Gospel and we will spend all eternity unpacking the glory and the beauty of the one who made this Gospel ours, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The point is this - the Gospel is just like marriage. There is a once for all ceremony, but then you spend the rest of your life unpacking the reality and the implications of what this Gospel means, what this marriage means and your being in union with Christ. And you're learning to delight in Him and to find more joy in belonging to Him than you find in anything or in anyone else. This is what the Holy Spirit is determined to shape within you. Not simply a "doing the right thing and pursuing your duty" but an ever-deeper delight in this Gospel that becomes ever more precious to you and to me.

Not A Rose, But An Arrow

I shared with you once a picture that Helen Roseveare talked about on a number of occasions when she spoke about her work. I think I talked about this two years ago at the Mission Conference. Interestingly Derek Thomas talked about the same missionary a week later. Let me refresh your memory. Helen Roseveare was born in Wales. She was a medical doctor, went to the Congo to serve as a medical missionary surgeon, and during the rebellion in the Congo her medical facility was overrun by rebels, she was captured, and she was brutalized, she was violated repeatedly. The rebels beat her senseless. They literally kicked the teeth out of her head. And she tells that story usually while she holds in her hand a rose, a single-stem rose. And she said, "You know, when I left the United Kingdom to become a medical missionary I thought my life was going to be like this rose. I was well-educated, I was attractive, I had something to offer. And I wanted to be on display so people would say, 'Wow, look what God did through her.' And yet as I went into a place that I really wasn't prepared for, in many respects a place I did not want to go, as I became the kind of person I did not wish to become, as God stripped away from me things I did not want to let go of," as she's telling this story she's plucking petals from the rose one by one and pretty soon there's no color left to the rose. And then she says, "That rebel uprising and being held for five months and brutalized repeatedly crushed me and I wasn't sure that I was going to survive." And she crushes the rose. And she said, "I thought this was my life and then God took it further. He began breaking the thorns off my life. The thorns I thought were needed because they allowed me to keep people at arm's distance. And while I served" - she was rescued, she went back to the United Kingdom and then came back and started the ministry over. And she said, "I wanted to keep people at arm's length because it felt safer that way and God, one by one, broke off all the things that allowed me to keep people at a safe distance." And even the medical, the Congolese staff whom she had trained, turned against her at different places and were really ugly toward her, to the point where she had to finally leave the field and went back to

England.

And then she pulls out a pocket knife and she begins stripping the green skin off that rose stem. And she says, "Lord, even that? This is what protected me. At least let me have the skin because look at what You're leaving me - You're leaving me just a white stick! I thought that You were going to use me for Your glory as a medical missionary. I thought You were going to do great things through my life!" And the Lord did spectacular things through her life but as she holds this now white stick in her hand she says, "God this? This is what I signed up for? I thought I'd be the rose and people would smell the fragrance and admire the beauty and say, 'That's amazing!'" And then holding that white stick Helen said, "It took me years to figure out that God never intended me to be a rose; He intended me to be an arrow, one which He could use in ways I never thought possible."

What do you think God is preparing for you? Of course you're not a guest in the world; you're a host, but what does that mean? Where will that take you? What will it cost you? And is it worth it? Or maybe that's the wrong question. Is He worth it? Or better, is He worthy? The Gospel will take you where you do not wish to go, the Gospel will make of you what you do not wish to become, the Gospel will strip you of what you do not wish to let go, but, but, the Gospel will give you what you cannot live without. Because that's true we'll celebrate together for all eternity. Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, we thank You that You're not calling us to something that You weren't called to Yourself because You left the place where You had every right to remain, the place where You were honored and celebrated by all, unceasingly, and You entered into our brokenness, You set aside the glory of heaven, the throne room of glory, and You became one of us. And You were broken, bruised, crushed, shamed, stripped bare, and You took our place not just that we might be forgiven but that we might become Your treasured possession, that we might become joint heirs with You, that Your perfect obedience becomes our perfect obedience, that Your glory and beauty becomes our glory and beauty, that Your being sent from and by the Father would become Your sending us. Lord, we're not entirely sure what that will look like nor what it will cost us, but because You did not consider equality with God something to be grasped and clung to and demanded, but emptied Yourself becoming one of us, setting aside the richness of all that was Yours to become our poverty and our brokenness, because of that we can smile and with absolute confidence and certainty say You are absolutely, completely, fully and eternally worthy of anything that You might call us to. Would You please keep us from ever drawing a line in the sand and saying, "This far and no further"? Would You please keep us from ever saying, "You've taken us too far"? Make us like children who simply allow You to hold us by the hand and lead us forward. And then remind us of the celebration that is yet to come because we know how this ends. We've read the last chapter, we know the celebration that awaits us, and so we look to You, trusting that You will provide

all that You have promised, all that is needed, even more all that is desired. We pray in Jesus' precious and holy name, amen.

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