

The Baptism of Our Lord

FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Mark 1:4-11

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Mark 1:4 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5And 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. 6Now John was clothed in camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7He 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. 8I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." 9In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10And 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. 11And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

DIAGNOSIS: Drowning in Sin

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Let's all repent!*

By the time John the Baptizer came along, a long time had passed since the last prophet. Heaven, it seemed, was sealed up. Israel was mastered by Rome and, despite the outward magnificence of Herod's Temple, suffered under spiritually corrupt leaders. Had the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob abandoned Israel? Into this

chaotic “wilderness” (v. 4) appeared John with a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4). Setting aside for a moment the question of how “for” should be translated here (Greek prepositions are notoriously ambiguous), John’s baptism was at least a demonstration that not all was right with the world, and that one “more powerful” than he (v. 7) was needed, even expected!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *But is repentance good enough?*

Not according to John, and not according to Jesus. Repentance—the recognition that sin is too deeply rooted to be mastered by outward changes—is a “beginning” of sorts (1:1) but it is not the “good news of Jesus Christ” (1:1). While John called for an act of repentance, Jesus announced the arriving reign of God (1:14)! The new world of God (or “kingdom of God” as it is usually translated) is not manifest by human will-power or worship, but by God’s new creativity, namely, the “forgiveness of sins” (2:5). The difference is between “water” and “Spirit” (v. 8), that is, between the very best that we are able to do for ourselves (or in pretense for God) and what only God can do for us (2:7). John’s baptism of repentance (7:6, 21)—that is, repentance apart from the forgiveness of sins—marks the final limit of rite worship.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Not Enough to Please God*

In light of Jesus’ announcement of God’s new world of forgiveness, John’s call to repentance (ours too) only reveals the present world’s darkness and the humanly-inaccessible depth of our sin. Small comfort is a baptism that demonstrates that we are engulfed and drowning in sin!

PROGNOSIS: Basking in Forgiveness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Forgiveness that Costs God*

The baptism with which Jesus baptizes, that is, “with the Holy Spirit” (v. 8), is “more powerful” (v. 7) than John’s call to repentance. In language that is not merely symbolic, the Spirit of God “tore heaven apart” (v. 10; see also 15:38; down to earth 14:58-64) in order, through Jesus, to accomplish the forgiveness of sins. Heaven was unsealed, but at great cost: the crucifixion of God’s Son, the Beloved (v. 11). The Spirit of God was unleashed in Jesus—as evidenced in his healings, his announcement of the kingdom’s arrival, and his resurrection from the dead. Jesus’ baptism by John in the Jordan was the “beginning of the good news” (1:1) in view of Jesus’ baptism with the Spirit of God—leading to his crucifixion—“FOR the forgiveness of sins” (v. 4).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Confessing Jesus*

In Mark’s telling of the gospel, Jesus is first confessed by God (v. 4; 9:7), then by the unclean spirits (1:24; 5:7), then by various unnamed people in fits and starts based on demonstrations of power—yet these mini-confessions, like a mustard seed, were sufficient to be described as “faith” (2:5, *passim*), then by the Gentile centurion (15:39), then by the angel (16:6). Strangely, there are no confessions by any disciples! They were uncertain about Jesus, even after reports of his resurrection. Mark’s gospel places the question of Jesus FOR the forgiveness of sins squarely on the reader, and that includes you and me. Everything in the new world of God, even our confessing, is a baptism with the Holy Spirit.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Pleasing God*

What is this new world of God that is circumscribed by the

Spirit of the living God and that basks in the forgiveness of sins? It is a world "well pleasing" to God, accomplished in its announcement (1:14). It is a confessed world, not a built-up world. It is God's world, not ours. We who confess Jesus "FOR the forgiveness of sins" (v. 4) live in the same new world of God that Jesus lived. Immersed in the Spirit of God, we are immediately sent into the old "chaotic wilderness" of real fear and real suffering and real death. There, where Jesus has already won the victory, the Good News is announced as accomplished. Of this, we can be sure that God is well-pleased.