

Mark 1.4-11
The Heavens Opened

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⁴And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I baptize you with^a water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Introduction

There were crowds of people there that day from the countryside and from the city as there were everyday. But that day, Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter's son, the Son of God, Messiah went to be baptized in John's baptism of repentance.

On that day the heaven's opened and the joy of God was spoken and the power of the Holy Spirit fell.

It began with one man: Jesus of Nazareth. In him began a redeemed human life a spirit-filled life unlike any other. A life that in Jesus Christ was unleashed upon the world. And the world has not been the same. Human life has not been the same. Our lives have not been the same. And the potential is there for everyone to live this redeemed, spirit-filled life if they will come to Messiah. And it began that day, the day Jesus began his ministry; the day the heavens opened.

The Context of the Messiah

We start with the context of the Messiah's ministry. This is set up for us by John the Baptist:

4 John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

An historical note, verse 5:

The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John is creating a stir, there is a mass movement going on. Both the country bumpkins and the city-slickers going out to John as he preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins; different from what they were getting from the Temple priests. John has his finger on the pulse of the deepest human need there is the forgiveness of sins. That is the point of what God was stirring up as the Messiah stepped onto the stage. God's desire is to free people from sin; to make an end to sin. The way God was preparing for that was not through the endless repetition of rituals and sacrifice but

through repentance. Repentance means acknowledging sin and turning away from it. And we see what this looks like: verse 5 **confessing their sins they were baptized in the Jordan River**. What a sight that must have been; crowds of people lining up confessing their sin and then being baptized in water. Baptism symbolizes washing clean from sin; a new beginning; the old has gone and new life beckons.

This is a revival it begins with repentance of sin with the offer of forgiveness.

John was setting the scene for Messiah. In the reading from Acts Paul, teaching some Christians in Ephesus about the Holy Spirit tells them: **Acts 19.4 John's baptism was a baptism of repentance; He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is in Jesus.**

The point is that the message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins sets the stage, for the work the Messiah.

And when Jesus begins his preaching ministry he cries out: **Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.**

Did Jesus come to liberate them from the Romans: no he came to liberate the people from sin.

Did Jesus come to lead a religious movement? No, he came to deal with sin. Did Jesus come to change the world? Yes. That begins with dealing with sin. Sin is at the heart of all injustice, oppression and estrangement in our world. Rooting out sin is at the heart of the Messiah's ministry.

We see this vividly enacted when Messiah comes to see John the Baptist. He who knew no sin submitted to the baptism of repentance and in that moment verse 10: **he saw heaven being torn open; and verse 11 and a voice came from heaven "You are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased."**

The heavens are literally torn apart as God the Father propels himself onto the scene. What seemed to be such an impassible divide between God and humankind dissolves as God's pleasure and joy in his Son demands expression. **You are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased.**

That is a particular message for Jesus: it launches him into this mission. Yet that is a picture of salvation. The estrangement between God and humanity is dissolved; and we too hear that word of affirmation: you are my child whom I love; with you I am pleased. That is salvation. It begins with Jesus and goes out to the ends of the earth. Whoever would come to Christ in repentance receives this same divine affirmation. If you have come to Christ, these words are true for you: you are in this relationship with God;

This calls us to move beyond sin. Some of us never get beyond feeling unworthy; if that is you it means you have not received in your heart this approval from God. You may need to hear this afresh this morning. It is true we all still sin, we will not be perfectly redeemed until eternity.

It is also true that if you have come to Christ, then your sin is done away with; it is not an issue for you anymore. And we are meant to live out our lives not in the light of our sinful natures but in the truth of God's approval: **You are my child whom I love, with you I am well pleased.** It means too that whenever we do fall into sin, we are free to return to our Lord in repentance, knowing that he will forgive and restore.

What a powerful basis for living a life that is rich and full; you don't need to be afraid you don't need to be insecure; you do not need to falter in your confidence; because you know God's approval in your life.

Receive this word in your heart;

That is the context of Jesus' ministry. Our part in it all is to repent and turn to him.

Hear the words of Peter **Acts 3.19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,**

Sin wiped out; times of refreshing come from the Lord. There is so much God wants to give us. Which leads me to my second point; we go from the **context** of the Messiah, to the **content** of his **ministry**.

The Content of His Ministry

John is baptizing in the desert; verse 7 **and this was his message: After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and unite. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**

Jesus wants to give you something powerful which will transform your life inside and out, will electrify your spiritual life, and which through transforming you will transform the world. We have come to the cross we've laid down our sin it is dealt with: what happens with the rest of your life? This is what happens: Jesus baptizes you with the Holy Spirit. He fills you with the Holy Spirit.

Some Christians will say "I have Jesus in my heart." Actually Jesus is risen, ascended and glorified. What he does is he places his Holy Spirit in you.

That is how Jesus transforms our lives and our hearts. Not through the endless repetitions of rituals and sacrifices but through the power of His Holy Spirit in our hearts. That is how Jesus intends to transform the world: by filling people with His Holy Spirit.

And again it begins with him at his baptism: verse 10 **the heavens torn open and the spirit descending on him like a dove.** God poured the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and Jesus pours the Holy Spirit upon us.

Going back to the episode in Acts 19 which was read out to us. When this small group were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ it then says verse 6 **when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied."**

It is a picture of a group of people being powerfully transformed by the Holy Spirit and turned into instruments of God's purposes in the world.

This is what Jesus wants to do in us. This is the content of his ministry in us. This is what the rest of our lives are about. We are not meant to go around in circles constantly revolving around our sinfulness. We go forward having been baptized in the Holy Spirit filled by the Holy Spirit and live out spirit-filled lives. Brothers and sisters, can you imagine a greater force for the transformation of our world than people living Spirit-filled lives?

How do you know you are filled with the Spirit? The Bible tells us – if you have turned to Christ he has placed his spirit in you. You don't feel it, you don't necessarily experience it. The evidence in your life is in your relationship with God. It is the Holy Spirit who opens up that relationship with God, that communication with God. And so if you have relationship with God you have been filled with the Spirit. You may not be living that out

Being filled with the Spirit is not primarily about a style of worship.

It is the content of the work of Christ in the rest of your life; it is the unique story that Christ writes in your life. It is different for us all.

Imagine how different the world would be:

If instead of doing my career in a spirit of ambition I do it in the power the Holy Spirit

If instead of relating to my family in a spirit of anger or cynicism, I relate to the people around me under the influence of the Holy Spirit;

If instead of sinking into a spirit of self-pity weakness, I rise in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

If instead of turning my heart towards sin that beckons I stand in the power of the Holy Spirit and let the Holy Spirit transform me.

In this Church I see many spirit-filled things happening:

My mother received a prayer quilt recently which she loves; my mother is a godly woman who lost the power of speech in a stroke; but she wraps herself up in her prayer shawl and prays; a spirit-filled ministry;

I see the Spirit at work in the loving-kindness of so many in this congregation;

I see the Spirit at work in our Suitcases for Africa ministry and lots of wonderful little things happening all around that.

In our Sunday school it is amazing. I see it in the desire in many hearts to draw closer to God and his word.

There is much Spirit-filledness in our congregation. You can't be more or less filled with the Spirit. But you do need to allow the Spirit to fill you, to allow the ministry of the Spirit within you. I know for myself I need in the quietness of my heart everyday to allow God's Holy Spirit to reign over me: to touch the places he wants to heal. Every day I need to pray quietly: Come Holy Spirit! Come and fill me afresh today.

This is the content of the Messiah's ministry: to fill us with the Holy Spirit and so transform our lives and transform our world.

The context of the Messiah: The content of his ministry.

It was a day unique in history, when the Messiah stepped onto the stage to begin his ministry. On that day God's joy at what he was about to unleash upon the world demanded expression. And in the life of one man, Jesus of Nazareth began the redeemed, spirit-filled life that God intends for all who will receive it. On that day a new reality burst upon the scene, a reality more glorious than any other, which is ours for the taking, ours for the living. It is shown to us in Christ Jesus; it is available to us in Christ Jesus; and it began that day, the day the heavens opened.