

# DAYS OF DECISION AND TESTING

*SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL*

**By Doug Goins**

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Psalms 2 was written about a thousand years before Jesus lived, and it begins with the rhetorical questions: “Why do the nations rage? Why do the peoples plot in vain?” The psalmist could easily have been writing about today--nations waging war against one another and against God, people plotting against one another, against God’s plans and against God’s purposes here on earth. But the psalmist also introduces one who is coming--one who will bring justice and peace, and who will end all of the chaos that is so real in our world. In Mark 1:9-13, we meet this One, the Lord’s anointed, the Son of God.

The passage begins with the phrase “Jesus came.” Last week (see Discovery Paper 4791) we saw in the opening verses a time of preparation for the nation Israel as they went out to see John in the wilderness and were baptized in the Jordan River. Jesus also came to meet John and was baptized. Mark now tells us of Jesus’ preparation for public ministry.

The Roman historian, Tacitus, describes the world into which Jesus came. Again, this could easily be a description of events in our time in terms of international tension. He writes about an unsettled world; crisis in the city of Rome which affects the entire Roman Empire.

*“The history in which I am entering is that of a period rich in disasters, terrible with battles, torn by civil struggles, horrible even in peace. Four emperors fell by the sword; there were three civil wars, more foreign wars, and often both at the same time. Italy was distressed by disasters unknown before. Beside the manifold misfortunes that befell mankind there were prodigies in the sky and on the earth, warnings given by thunderbolts and prophecies of the future both joyful and gloomy, uncertain and clear.” (1)*

Jesus entered a world that seemed to be coming apart at the seams, with the tumult of both civil and international war occurring simultaneously. There were internal threats as well--false fears, false hopes, false Messiah’s, false prophets. Let’s now look at Mark 1:9-13:

**In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.” Immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.**

Two preparatory events take place before Jesus can begin his public ministry. In the middle of verse 14 Mark writes, “*Jesus came* into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God.” That statement is in the active voice. Jesus is coming to do something, to preach the gospel. But in verse 13 the same phrase, “Jesus came,” is in the passive voice. In this case, Jesus was acted upon, he received something. Verse 9 says he was baptized by John. Verse 13 says he was being tempted by Satan. Both of these events are part of God’s preparation for Jesus--for his Messianic ministry of salvation. For Jesus they represent days of decision and testing. This is also one of the great Trinitarian passages of the New Testament. Here we see God the Holy Spirit and God the Father both bearing witness to God the Son.

## **Jesus identifies with sinners**

Beginning in verse 9, the focus is on Jesus. The one being baptized in the wilderness is the same One who identifies with sinners: “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” In verses 4 and 5 we saw that John offered a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Many

people responded to this call, confessing their sins and being baptized. So, why did Jesus submit himself to this baptism? He wasn't a sinner. Scripture is clear that he was the sinless Son of God. In fact, in Matthew's account of the baptism we're told that when John recognized his cousin Jesus coming he was reluctant to baptize him saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:14, 15). It was God's plan, his purpose for Jesus, to be identified with us in our sinful humanity, in our failure, and in our weakness.

Jesus' decision to be baptized was out of obedience; an event which symbolizes what Jesus' entire ministry was to involve--making it possible for sinners to repent, to find forgiveness, and to enter into new life. His baptism in the Jordan River is a picture of his baptism of suffering yet to come on the cross, when he takes the sins of the world on himself. Jesus fulfills all righteousness through his death, his burial and then through his resurrection. Paul summarizes this great reality for us in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." God takes the sinless One and places the sins of the world on him so that we, the unrighteous, can know righteousness.

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan was an expression of his love for the lost world to which he came. It also represented his loving identification with the guilty, fearful people who were estranged from God. Those were the people who were flocking to the desert for John's baptism. As Jesus stood with them, and went under the water just as they did, he was saying to them and to all of us, "I love you. I am one with you."

## **The heavens are opened**

In verse 10, the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus: "And immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him...." The first thing Jesus sees is the opening or ripping of the heavens. The phrase "heavens opening" comes from the Greek verb *schizo* (where we get our verb schizophrenia) meaning, literally, to tear apart. The same verb is used later in Mark to describe the temple curtain being torn from top to bottom when Jesus gave up his life on the cross.

Notice the heavens are not delicately or carefully opened but are *ripped* open. Imagine a bolt of lightning piercing the sky above your head and the sky opening up dramatically, spectacularly. The difference is very important: What is carefully opened can be closed again, but what is ripped apart can't be easily put back together. Mark is telling us that when Jesus came up out of the waters of baptism, all heaven broke loose (and following in the story of Jesus' temptation, all hell is going to break loose). The heavens being ripped or torn open is a beautiful and compelling sign of God's loving, sovereign access to us. He comes when, where and how he chooses. That's the power of love against which nothing can stand. The hope of Isaiah 64:1 is now fulfilled: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!" (NIV).

## **The Spirit descends**

Jesus also saw the Holy Spirit, "like a dove descending...." Jesus is given a new manifestation of the Holy Spirit at the very moment that he begins the process of identifying with us. The promise of the Old Testament was that the Messiah would possess the Spirit of God. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on Him..." (Isaiah 11:1-2a). Jesus sees the Spirit come fluttering down on him like a dove. It doesn't come swooping down like an eagle or a falcon to initiate God's reign here on earth, but it comes quietly, gently, hovering over him.

That's the same Holy Spirit of God that we are introduced to in Genesis 1:2, the Spirit that hovers over the primeval waters of chaos; hovering with enormous creative force and power. The Spirit descends on Jesus to empower him to rescue us from chaos--the chaos that we create through sinful choices, and the chaos of the rebellious world in which we live. As God brought order out of chaos when he created the world, Jesus now

comes to accomplish a new creation *in us*. This time the Spirit hovers over a human, not over some formless void, and transforms humanity. Here again is the triumph of relational love.

## **My beloved Son**

Paul celebrates this loving creativity in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.” Jesus is baptized, the Spirit of God empowers him for ministry, and then, in verse 11, he hears the affirming voice of God speak: “...and a voice came out of the heavens: ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.’” It’s important for Jesus to hear this declaration of love; of God’s affection, delight, and of the Father’s pleasure in the Son. These are the words that we all long to hear from people who matter most to us--authority figures, our parents, people we respect and look up to. In *The Message*, Eugene Peterson paraphrases this: “You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life.”

Those are beautiful words of blessing, but they are also words of purpose. Notice that this word of affirmation comes before Jesus has done anything. There is an unconditional commitment, acceptance with no performance attached to it whatsoever.

But, it also clarifies his identity, and his mission. God’s affirmation, the phrase in verse 11, combines three important texts from the Old Testament. First, “You are my son,” is the image of the Messianic King in the coronation found in Psalm 2 where the king says, “I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, ‘You are my Son, today I have begotten You’” (Psalm 2:7).

However, Mark adds a word that is not in Psalm 2 saying, “You are my *beloved* son.” That description recalls another Old Testament text that comes out of a story in Genesis when God speaks to his servant Abraham and says, “Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains in which I will tell you” (Genesis 22:2).

The final phrase, “in You I am well-pleased,” comes from Isaiah 42, one of the servant songs that Scott Grant recently expounded for us (Discovery Paper 4781). In the opening verse, God says of the servant, “Behold, My servant whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights [or “in whom I am well-pleased”]. “I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1, 2).

When the three Old Testament passages are combined, it’s clear that this beloved Son of God, the Messianic Servant King, must die. Never before have these themes of Israel’s Messianic King and the Suffering Servant been fused together like this. What emerges is the unique Son-ship of Jesus to his loving heavenly Father; His beloved only Son. Jesus will trust that love even unto death. He will surrender to it in obedience all the way to the cross.

So here, at the beginning, Jesus hears God’s “I love you.” And at the end, as Jesus is dying on the cross, his voluntary, sacrificial death speaks loudly to the world. In dying for us Jesus says, “*And I love you!*”

## **Into the wilderness**

Mark gives us no time to reflect on all the implications of this. He immediately thrusts us into an intense scene of conflict, the testing of Jesus in the wilderness: “And immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.” It’s very unsettling to have these two stories juxtaposed this way, but it’s in line with Mark’s whole approach to storytelling--the brevity, the rawness of it that is so typical of him. Jesus has the empowerment of the Holy Spirit, the affirmation of his heavenly father, yet it doesn’t result, for Jesus, in some sort of euphoric state of spiritual well-being, of inner tranquility. He has no time to even worship

in response to word of his father. He is immediately rushed into conflict with the Satanic enemy. But what the affirming words of the Father and the empowerment by the Spirit do is strengthen him to be driven deeper into the desolation of the wilderness, into the grasp of the enemy and the threat of wild beasts of prey as he is thrown head long into a cosmic conflict that lasts for forty days.

Notice the emphasis in verse 12 on the absolute necessity of this testing. The text says that he was “impelled” by the Spirit; literally, *driven out* into the wilderness, as opposed to Matthew and Luke’s accounts where he was *led out* by the Spirit. There is no sense in Mark’s account that Jesus is unwilling to go, but it’s the urgency that he should do so that is emphasized; the importance of the conflict.

Mark uses the word “immediately” forty-five times throughout his gospel account; twice already in this passage alone in verses 10 and 12. That word, as it’s used over and over again in Mark’s gospel, harmonizes well with Jesus’ use of the word “must” when prophesying his own death and resurrection. In chapter 8 he says, “And [Jesus] began to teach [the disciples] that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed. And after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). So his being driven out into the wilderness has to do with this beloved Son obeying the Father’s will under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Notice the severity of the satanic testing in verse 13. Mark says that it’s constant; forty days of sustained pressure from the enemy of humanity, Satan himself. He is the one behind the nations raging in Psalm 2. He is the one behind people plotting against one another and against God. The other accounts in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 tell of Satan’s strategy. Satan attacked Jesus physically through hunger for food. He attacked him emotionally through isolation. He attacked him spiritually through suggesting that he could avoid death on the cross; there could be a short cut to power, authority and leadership.

The battle takes place “in the wilderness.” To the first-century Jew, the desert was a forbidding, terrifying place; evil spirits and dangerous animals lived there. It is a reminder of Israel’s forty years in the wilderness of Sinai, following their exodus from Egypt. Israel failed their test, but Jesus does battle and he emerges victoriously.

Part of the testing was the threat of the wild beasts. Numbers 21:6 tells us that at one point in their wilderness wanderings, the people of Israel were attacked by poisonous snakes and many people died. Being in the wilderness with the wild beasts had no romantic associations. It wasn’t like Grizzly Adams curling up with a mountain lion at night for warmth. The emphasis here is in on God’s protection, similar to when Daniel was in the lion’s den.

Finally, Mark tells us that Jesus enjoyed a ministry of angelic comfort and sustenance. We don’t know specifically how the angels cared for Jesus, but from the vocabulary used in the telling of this account in the other gospels, words such as “protection,” “guidance,” “provision,” and “sustenance,” we can better understand what was obviously the supernatural activity of God on behalf of his Son.

Now, Mark doesn’t make any attempt to explain the link between the baptism of Jesus and the temptation of Jesus, but there are connections that will gradually emerge as the story of unfolds. At his baptism, Jesus humbles himself by entering the rank of sinners. Later on he is going to die for them, but instead of standing in solidarity, he will die alone, abandoned on a cross. His baptism launches him on the servant road of obedience, which ultimately leads to his death. In Mark 10:38, Jesus asks his disciples, in anticipation of his death, “are you able to drink the cup that I drink,”--the cup of God’s wrath, God’s judgment on sin--“or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” In other words, “Will you follow me in death? Are you able to do so?”

Even though this thundering approval of God from heaven reveals Jesus’ divine identity, it also links him to his calling--his humble identification with us. Jesus doesn’t come as a powerful conquering Messiah, or as an irresistible force. He’s submissive, yielding in obedience to the baptism of John. God’s kingdom isn’t coming with bombs bursting in air and with sirens blaring, but quietly and inconspicuously.

Mark doesn’t tell us much about Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness; only of his victory over Satan in the

desert. But what is significant is that Satan never shows up again the way he did here. Mark wants us to see the decisive defeat of evil. Later, in Mark 3:27, Jesus himself describes this victory as “binding the strong man.” When Jesus does confront the demonic, and releases people from demonic captivity, it’s a mop up operation.

Like the baptism, the temptation also reinforces Jesus’ distinction as the Son of God. Robert Gundry, in his commentary on Mark, writes:

*His being tempted by none less than Satan, the arch-demon, carries acknowledgment of Jesus’ stature as the very Son of God. The wildness of the beasts with which Jesus is present without harmful consequences bears witness to his being God’s Son, the stronger one of whom John the baptizer spoke. That angels serve Jesus adds a final touch to Mark’s portrayal of him as no less a personage than the Spirit endued Son of God. (2)*

The devil, the wild beasts, and the angels all acknowledge in their own way that Jesus is the beloved Son of God.

Both stories--the baptism and the temptation--speak powerfully of Mark’s central theme of the costliness of commitment to God’s way of salvation; the way of suffering love. “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

## **Following Jesus**

As we move into verse 14, we will hear the invitation of Jesus to each one of us, “follow me,” and we will begin to examine the implications for our personal discipleship. Following Jesus won’t be easy. His baptism promises us that we are lovingly accepted and affirmed by God’s grace and we experience it in our own discipleship. But we live in a world where God’s grace is neither welcomed, nor applauded. People can be made uneasy by such a free offer of salvation, by such unconditional affirmations of love and delight; “I love you because I choose to love you” makes us squirm. Most of us would rather work things out on our own and somehow earn God’s favor. Jesus’ temptation also reminds us that there is spiritual warfare--an ongoing battle between good and evil--and that as followers of Jesus we are drawn into that battle; we can’t escape it. We are only going to survive by God’s grace, and just like Jesus, by submissive obedience to God’s will.

Next week Jesus will come “preaching the gospel of God,” saying “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). If we are going to be faithful witnesses to that gospel, we must not give the impression that becoming a Christian is mainly a way of solving our problems, of making life more tolerable and even enjoyable for ourselves. Certainly the gospel is about receiving salvation by grace through faith in Christ, but receiving salvation *begins* the process of following Jesus.

## **The narrow way**

We’re called into a lifestyle of sacrificial service. Scott made that very clear in his two messages from Philippians 2 (Discovery Papers 4785 and 4786). Jesus modeled it in how he lived, he taught it clearly, and the early church preached it as well. Our calling is to serve God through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in a lost and dying world. That’s anything but easy. It’s not the broad way; it’s the narrow way. The New Testament writers described it as “dying with Christ” and then “rising with Christ.” Too many of us want the rising part, but aren’t thrilled about the dying part; we don’t want the cross at the center.

The cross was Satan’s last attempt to destroy Jesus and undermine God’s plan of salvation for the world. At the cross we hear another voice that affirms Jesus’ Son-ship. It’s not the voice of God, but a Gentile, a pagan Roman soldier--the Centurion who confesses Jesus’ identity. “Truly,” the Centurion says, “this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). The Father says it at the beginning, a non-believer says it at the end; it comes full circle.

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NOTES:

(1) Tacitus, *The Histories*, Volume 1. © 1925 Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. Pp. 2-3.

(2) Gundry, Robert, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross*. © 1993, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI. P. 59.

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Mark 1:9-13

2nd Message

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