

Daily Devotions
with William Barclay

*365 Meditations on the Heart
of the New Testament*

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JANUARY

The Gift of God

January 1

The Beginning of the Story

Mark 1:1–4

Mark starts the story of Jesus a long way back. It did not begin with Jesus' birth; it did not even begin with John the Baptizer in the wilderness; it began with the dreams of the prophets long ago; that is to say, it began long, long ago in the mind of God.

There are things we may well learn here.

(1) It has been said that 'the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts', and so are the thoughts of God. God is characteristically a God who is working his purposes out. History is not a random kaleidoscope of disconnected events; it is a process directed by the God who sees the end in the beginning.

(2) We are within that process, and because of that we can either help or hinder it. In one sense it is as great an honour to help in some great process as it is a privilege to see the ultimate goal. Life would be very different if, instead of yearning for some distant and at present unattainable goal, we did all that we could to bring that goal nearer. The goal will never be reached unless there are those who labour to make it possible.

The prophetic quotation which Mark uses is suggestive. 'I send my messenger before you and he will prepare your road for you.' This is from Malachi 3:1. In its original context it is a threat. In Malachi's day the priests were failing in their duty. The offerings were blemished and shoddy second-bests; the service of the Temple was a weariness to them. The messenger was to cleanse and purify the worship of the Temple before the Anointed One of God emerged upon the earth. So then the coming of Christ was a purification of life. And the world needed that purification. Seneca called Rome 'a cesspool of iniquity'. Juvenal spoke of her 'as the filthy sewer into which flowed the abominable dregs of every Syrian and Achaean stream'. Wherever Christianity comes it brings purification.

January 2

The Herald of the King

Mark 1:5–8

It is clear that the ministry of John was mightily effective, for they flocked out to listen to him and to submit to his baptism. Why was it that John made an impact such as this upon his nation?

(1) He was a man who lived his message. Not only his words, but also his whole life was a protest. There was the place in which he stayed—the wilderness. He was a man from the desert and from its solitudes and its desolations. He was a man who had given himself a chance to hear the voice of God. There were the clothes he wore—a garment woven of camel's hair and a leather belt about his waist. So did Elijah (2 Kings 1:8). To look at the man was to be reminded, not of the fashionable orators of the day, but of the ancient prophets who lived close to the great simplicities and avoided the soft and comfortable luxuries which kill the soul. There was the food he ate—locusts and wild honey. Many extol the blessings of poverty from comfortable homes. But in the case of John, the man was the message, and because of that people listened.

(2) His message was effective because he told people what in their heart of hearts they knew and brought them what in the depths of their souls they were waiting for.

(3) His message was effective because he was completely humble. His own verdict on himself was that he was not fit for the duty of a slave. Sandals were composed simply of leather soles fastened to the foot by straps passing through the toes. The roads were unsurfaced. In dry weather they were dust-heaps; in wet weather rivers of mud. To remove the sandals was the work and office of a slave. John asked nothing for himself but everything for the Christ whom he proclaimed. The man's obvious self-forgottenness, his patent yield- edness, his complete self-effacement, his utter lostness in his message compelled people to listen.

John's one aim was not to occupy the centre of the stage himself, but to try to connect men and women with the one who was greater and stronger than he; and they listened to him because he pointed, not to himself, but to the one whom we all need.

January 3

The Day of Decision

Mark 1:9–11

To any thinking person the baptism of Jesus presents a problem. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, meant for those who were sorry for their sins and who wished to express their determination to have done with them. What had such a baptism to do with Jesus? Was he not the sinless one, and was not such a baptism unnecessary and quite irrelevant as far as he was concerned? For Jesus the baptism was four things.

(1) It was the moment of decision. For thirty years he had stayed in Nazareth. Faithfully he had done his day's work and discharged his duties to his home. For a long time he must have been conscious that the time for him to go out had to come. He must have waited for a sign. The emergence of John was that sign. This, he saw, was the moment when he had to launch out upon his task.

(2) It was the moment of identification. It is true that Jesus did not need to repent from sin, but here was a movement of the people back to God, and with that Godward movement he was determined to identify himself. It is possible to possess ease and comfort and wealth and still to identify with a movement to bring better things to the downtrodden and the poor and the ill-housed and the overworked and the underpaid. The really great identification is when people identify with a movement, not for their own sake, but for the sake of others.

(3) It was the moment of approval. No one lightly leaves home and sets out on an unknown way. He or she must be very sure that the decision is right. Jesus had decided on his course of action, and now he was looking for the seal of the approval of God.

(4) It was the moment of equipment. At that time the Holy Spirit descended upon him. There is a certain symbolism here. The Spirit descended as a dove might descend. The dove is the symbol of gentleness. He will conquer, but the conquest will be the conquest of love.

January 4

The Testing Time

Mark 1:12–13

In this life it is impossible to escape the assault of temptation, but one thing is sure—temptations are not sent to us to make us fall; they are sent to strengthen the nerve and the sinew of our minds and hearts and souls. They are not meant for our ruin, but for our good. They are meant to be tests from which we emerge better warriors and athletes of God.

Here we have the whole essence of the temptation story. Jesus had to decide how he was to do his work. He was conscious of a tremendous task and he was also conscious of tremendous powers. God was saying to him, ‘Take my love to men and women; love them till you die for them; conquer them by this unconquerable love even if you finish up upon a cross.’ Satan was saying to Jesus, ‘Use your power to blast men and women; obliterate your enemies; win the world by might and power and bloodshed.’ God said to Jesus, ‘Set up a reign of love.’ Satan said to Jesus, ‘Set up a dictatorship of force.’ Jesus had to choose that day between the way of God and the way of the Adversary of God.

Mark’s brief story of the Temptations finishes with two vivid touches.

(1) The animals were his companions. In the desert there roamed the leopard, the bear, the wild boar and the jackal. This is usually taken to be a vivid detail that adds to the grim terror of the scene. But perhaps it is not so. Perhaps this is a lovely thing, for perhaps it means that the animals were Jesus’ friends.

(2) The angels were helping him. There are always the divine reinforcements in the hour of trial. When Elisha and his servant were shut up in Dothan with their enemies pressing in upon them and no apparent way of escape, Elisha opened the young man’s eyes, and all around he saw the horses and the chariots of fire which belonged to God (2 Kings 6:17). Jesus was not left to fight his battle alone—and neither are we.

January 5

The Witness of John

John 1:19–28

The deputation which came to interview John was composed of two kinds of people. First, there were the priests and the Levites. Their interest was very natural, for John was the son of Zacharias, and Zacharias was a priest (Luke 1:5). In Judaism, the only qualification for the priesthood was descent. If a man was not a descendant of Aaron, nothing could make him a priest; if he was a descendant of Aaron, nothing could stop him being one. Therefore, in the eyes of the authorities, John the Baptist was in fact a priest, and it was very natural that the priests should come to find out why he was behaving in such an unusual way.

Second, there were emissaries of the Pharisees. It may well be that behind them was the Sanhedrin. One of the functions of the Sanhedrin was to deal with anyone who was suspected of being a false prophet. John was a preacher to whom the people were flocking in hordes. The Sanhedrin may well have felt it their duty to check up on this man in case he was a false prophet.

The emissaries of the orthodox asked him who he was; his answer was that he was nothing but a voice bidding men and women prepare the way for the King. The quotation is from Isaiah 40:3. All the gospels cite it (Mark 1:3; Matthew 3:3; Luke 3:4). The idea behind it is this: The roads of Palestine were not surfaced and metalled. They were mere tracks. When a king was about to visit a province, when a conqueror was about to travel through his domains, the roads were smoothed and straightened out and put in order. We are to understand that by this time the baptism of Jesus had taken place at which John had recognized Jesus. So here John is saying again: 'The King is coming. And, for his coming, you need to be cleansed as much as any Gentile. Prepare yourself for the entry into history of the King.'

John is the great example of a man prepared to obliterate himself in order that Jesus Christ may be seen. He was only, as he saw it, a signpost pointing to Christ. God give us grace to forget ourselves and to remember only Christ.

January 6

The Coming of the Spirit

John 1:32–34

Here we can learn a great deal of what the word *baptism* means. The Greek verb *baptizein* means *to dip* or *to submerge*. It can be used of clothes being dipped in dye; it can be used of a ship submerged beneath the waves; it can be used of a person who is so drunk that he is soaked in drink. When John says that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, he means that Jesus can bring God's Spirit to us in such a way that we are saturated and our life and being are flooded with that Spirit.

Now what did this baptism mean for John? His own baptism meant two things.

(1) It meant cleansing. It meant being washed from the impurities that cling to us.

(2) It meant dedication. It meant going out to a new and a different and a better life.

But Jesus' baptism was a baptism of the Spirit. If we remember the Jewish conception of the Spirit, we can say that when the Spirit takes possession of us certain things happen.

(1) Our lives are enlightened. There comes to us the knowledge of God and God's will. We know what God's purpose is, what life means, where duty lies. Some of God's wisdom and light has come into us.

(2) Our lives are strengthened. Knowledge without power is a haunting and frustrating thing. But the Spirit gives us not only knowledge to know the right, but also strength and power to do it. The Spirit gives us a triumphant adequacy to cope with life.

(3) Our lives are purified. Christ's baptism with the Spirit was to be a baptism of fire (Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16). The dross of evil things, the alloy of the lower things, the base admixture is burned away until we become clean and pure.

Often our prayers for the Spirit are a kind of theological and liturgical formality, but when we know that for which we are praying, these prayers become a desperate cry from the heart.

January 7

The First Disciples

John 1:35–39

Here we have the symbol of the divine initiative. It is always God who takes the first step. When the human mind begins to seek and the human heart begins to long, God comes to meet us far more than halfway. God does not leave us to search and search until we come to him; God comes out to meet us.

Jesus began by asking these two men the most fundamental question in life: ‘What are you looking for?’ It would be well if every now and again we were to ask ourselves: ‘What am I looking for? What’s my aim and goal? What am I really trying to get out of life?’

Some are searching for security. They would like a position which is safe, money enough to meet the needs of life and to put some past for the time when work is done, a material security which will take away the essential worry about material things. This is not a wrong aim, but it is a low aim, and an inadequate thing to which to direct all life; for, in the last analysis, there is no safe security in the chances and the changes of this life.

Some are searching for what they would call a career, for power, prominence, prestige, for a place to fit the talents and the abilities they believe themselves to have, for an opportunity to do the work they believe themselves capable of doing. If this is directed by motives of personal ambition it can be a bad aim; if it is directed by motives of the service of our neighbours it can be a high aim. But it is not enough, for its horizon is limited by time and by the world. Some are searching for some kind of peace, for something to enable them to live at peace with themselves, and at peace with God, and at peace with others. This is the search for God; this aim only Jesus Christ can meet and supply.

The answer of John’s disciples was that they wished to know where Jesus stayed. They wished to linger long with him and talk out their problems and their troubles. Those who would be Jesus’ disciples can never be satisfied with a passing word. They want to meet Jesus, not as an acquaintance in passing, but as a friend in their own homes.