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GOD'S PERFECT SERVANT

(Mark 1: 1-3)

R. NORTH

God, in His goodness and wisdom, has been pleased to give us four Gospels, bringing before us four different aspects of the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Mark emphasises the SERVANT character of our Lord, introducing Him as the Unwearied Worker for the glory of God and the blessing of man. Throughout the gospel our attention is focused upon the Person Who *serves*, rather than upon the objects of His service. The key-verse is chapter 10:45; 'For even the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many'. Others have suggested as a fitting motto the words of Peter to Cornelius, 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power, Who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the Devil' (Acts 10:38). As we take up this Gospel, and listen to the voice of God whispering in our ears 'Behold My Servant', we share with Him His delight in His Son.

The secret of all true service is the *opened ear*. His angels, mighty in strength, do His commandments, 'hearkening unto the voice of His word' (Ps. 103:20). But what ministry of angels can compare with the ministry of our Lord? He is perfect and unique wherever we see Him; not only in His unwearied service among men, but in the greatest act of service ever He performed, in the voluntary offering of Himself unto death, and that the death of the cross.

What was the secret of His service? 'The Lord hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary. He wakeneth morning by morning, He wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned. The Lord God hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious (in spirit), neither turned away back' (in act); (Isa. 50:4, 5). How many opportunities we have of helping by a word those who are weary, and how often we have little or nothing to say! Why is it? Is it not because our

ears are not wakened morning by morning to hear as those who need to be taught? His ear was opened to receive Divine instruction as to His pathway of service and of suffering, which culminated in the death of the cross. 'And when the hour was come that He should be received up, HE steadfastly set His face to go to Jerusalem' (Luke 9:51), fully knowing all that should come upon Him. His ascension into heaven is recorded in Mark 16 as the fitting close to His life of service down here; but, as another has observed, 'this does not change the unwearied Worker'. for immediately we read that His disciples went forth and preached everywhere, 'the LORD working with them and confirming the word with signs following'. He is the SERVANT still!

How wonderful the grace that took up Mark, the servant that *failed*, to set before us the Servant Who *never failed*? What an encouragement to us! Failure and imperfection are inseparable from all merely human service. This only magnifies the grace of our God and throws into brighter relief the matchless service of our Lord.

In Mark's Gospel there is no genealogy, and no account of the Lord's birth. We are introduced almost immediately to His service. Mark is essentially the *Gospel of action*. The Lord is seen moving rapidly but unhurriedly from one service to another, meeting each need as it arises. But before Mark records a word about the Lord's service, he brings before us the Person who comes to serve—Jesus Christ the Son of God. JESUS was the name given to the Son of God at His incarnation. It was the name by which He was known among men. It proclaims His character as Saviour. CHRIST is the Messiah, the Anointed One. *John*, who leaned on the Lord's bosom, views Him as 'the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father'. *Luke* connects His Sonship with His Incarnation (ch. 1:35); *Matthew* with the calling out of Egypt (ch. 2:15); *Mark* with the commencement of His public ministry. His Deity shines through all His service. In His precious Name and title, and His unique relationship with the Father, we have the perfect combination of Divine sympathy and Divine power.

In *verses 2 and 3*, we have the testimony of the prophets.

Two Old Testament prophets are quoted: Malachi and Isaiah. In Mal. 3:1 we read, 'Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me'; that is, before JEHOVAH. In Mark 1:2 we read, 'Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee'; i.e., before the face of Jesus Christ the Son of God. In Isa. 40:3, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of Jehovah; make straight in the désert a highway for our God" '. In Mark 1:13 these words are applied to Jesus Christ the Son of God, who is thus identified with Jehovah, the eternal, self-existing One, and with Elohim the triune GOD. How significant is this testimony to our Lord's Deity, in the opening words of the gospel of the SERVANT, especially in view of the comparative absence of quotations from the Old Testament in Mark's Gospel.

In *verses* 4 to 8, we have the testimony of John the Baptist. 'John came baptizing in the wilderness, and preaching the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins'. His preaching and baptizing created such a stir that 'there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem, and were all baptized by him in Jordan, confessing their sins'; that is, confessing by their action outwardly at least, their need of a Saviour and their readiness to welcome Him when He came. John also preached saying: 'There cometh One mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you in water, but He shall baptize you in the Holy Ghost'. It is to be noted that Mark makes no mention of baptism in fire, which awaits the coming of our Lord to execute judgment. Baptism in the Holy Ghost alludes to that which took place on the day of Pentecost.

If John had been occupied with himself, and with his own service, he might have thought he was worthy of a much higher station than that of a slave who stoops down to unloose his master's sandals.

John was at the height of his fame. Thousands of Israel had gone out to him to be baptized in Jordan, confessing their sins. Yet he places himself at the feet of the One of whom he was only the herald, unworthy to perform the office of the meanest slave.

What a lesson for us all! A little popularity, a little blessing, may so inflate us with pride that we begin to think we are somebody, instead of the bondslaves of Jesus Christ. Ministry that attracts to itself is not true ministry at all. True ministry attracts to Christ. May the Lord give us grace to remain little in our own eyes!

John came baptizing in the wilderness (v. 4). 'Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee' (v. 9). Galilee was always referred to with contempt by the Judeans. 'Shall Christ come out of Galilee?' It was unthinkable! When Nicodemus said, 'Doth our law judge any man before it hear him and know what he doeth?' The Pharisees turned on him and said, 'Art thou also of Galilee? Search and see, for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet.' In their blindness and prejudice they overlooked that at least one prophet (Jonah and probably Nahum) came out of Galilee. Nazareth had a bad name even in Galilee, so much so that even Nathaniel exclaimed, 'Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?' The answer of Philip is the answer for all sceptics or doubters, 'Come and see'. It was the challenge of experience.

In marvellous grace, Jesus not only came from Nazareth of Galilee: He came to be baptized by John in Jordan. What a sight for heaven and earth to behold! John had been preaching the baptism of repentance unto remission of sins. Here was One who *did* no sin, Who *knew* no sin, and *in whom was no sin*. How was it HE came to be baptized? He identified Himself with the penitent in Israel, and as the Servant of Jehovah He came to meet their need. His baptism in Jordan was the figure of the baptism that awaited Him at the end of His pathway, when He said, 'I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straightened till it be accomplished' (Lk. 12:50). At His baptism in Jordan He took the place in death typically which He afterwards took in reality on the cross of Calvary, as the only basis for the remission of sins. He is not 'straightened' now. Repentance and remission of sins can be preached in His name among all nations (Lk. 24:47).

In verses 10 and 11, we have the testimony of the Father. The word 'straightway' which occurs so often in Mark (sometimes translated 'immediately' or 'forthwith' etc.) implies the immediate

response of heaven to all that our Lord's baptism so profoundly meant. Mark tells us that 'He (i.e. Jesus) saw the heavens opened'. He also uses a stronger word than Matthew and Luke; literally, 'He saw the heavens cleft (or rent) asunder'; as if the Father were hastening to proclaim the delight He found in His Son. Moreover, Mark tells us that the words spoken were addressed to the Lord Himself: 'THOU art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. It was the Father's voice to His Son, whether others heard it or not. But could anything be more wonderful than the fact that these words should be recorded, and that the Father should be pleased to *let us* hear what He had to say to His Son? This is fellowship indeed! The more we realise how precious He is to the Father, the more precious He becomes to *us*!

'And the Spirit, like a dove,' descended upon Him. Our Lord's baptism is the only occasion in Scripture where the Spirit is referred to in this way. He came as a dove, the symbol of the infinite gentleness and harmlessness of Jesus of Nazareth. He had come upon men like Gideon and Samson and David, but not until Jesus Christ came was there one upon whom the Holy Spirit could *abide*. How beautifully these verses correspond with the prophecy concerning Him in Isaiah 42: 'Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; mine elect in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my Spirit upon Him'. Later on, in Isaiah 53, His sacrificial death is brought before us, of which the dove would also remind us; for the dove was the bird of sacrifice, which the poorest could bring and find acceptance. The Psalmist speaks of 'the wings of a dove covered with silver', type of redemption; 'and her feathers with yellow gold,' implying His supreme worth (Psa. 68:13).

At one baptism alone were the heavens opened: at one baptism alone the Holy Spirit came down like a dove: at one baptism alone there came the Voice out of heaven, 'Thou art my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. The moral perfection of that One heaven must own; the Holy Spirit seal; and the Father express His unqualified approval and infinite delight in, at the threshold of His public ministry. Towards its close, when His disciples were with Him on the Holy Mount, 'He received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a Voice to Him

from the excellent glory: "This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (2 Pet. 1:17).

Turning to *verses 12 and 13*, we read of His testing and preparation for service. Once again we find the word 'immediately'. 'Immediately the Spirit driveth Him into the wilderness'. Matthew and Luke tell us He was 'led by the Spirit into the wilderness'. All three evangelists unite in recording that the Spirit was the first mover and not the Devil; but when Mark tells us that the Spirit 'driveth Him', there is no suggestion of unwillingness on the part of the Lord Himself. Emphasis is placed upon the *resistless energy* of the Spirit in whose fulness and power the Lord always moved from the moment of His anointing. The Lord Himself used the same word when He said to His disciples, 'the harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers few. Pray ye, therefore, the Lord of the harvest, that He will send forth (drive forth) labourers into His harvest'. Not merely 'send forth', but impel them to go forth; and then, as it so often is the case, we find He turned these praying ones into labourers themselves. Hence the word is used here in a similar context in reference to the service of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Why did the Spirit drive Him into the wilderness? Because He was about to 'bring to naught the works of the Devil'. Therefore He must meet the Great Adversary himself. He first binds the strong man, and then proceeds to spoil his goods. Mark passes over the details of the temptation recorded by Matthew and Luke. He records the fact, in order to show that before the Lord commenced His public ministry He confronted the Adversary in the wilderness and emerged victorious. For 4,000 years Satan had held men in bondage; and the question is raised, 'Shall the prey be taken from the mighty? or the captive be delivered?' (Isa. 49:24). Thank God he shall! But who could deliver? No angel could accomplish it. No mortal could effect it. Their deliverance awaited the coming of One Who was stronger than the strong man; and having defeated the great Antagonist in the wilderness, our Lord went forth to deliver them that were oppressed of the Devil. He entered upon His ministry as the Victorious One in time and eternity.