

Mark 1:1-8 Where do we go to prepare for Christmas? December 10-11, 2017

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God's undeserved love and peace are yours for Christmas through Christ your Savior and Lord. Amen.
God's Word given to prepare us to hear the good news of Christmas is written in Mark 1:1-8
These are Your words heavenly Father. Use them to help us appreciate the coming of Jesus. Your Word is.

Dear Christian Friends,

As people prepare for Christmas, sometimes they need to go places. Some people will travel to spend time with family or friends at Christmas. Others will stay at home to set up a Christmas tree or decorations. Some will go out to stores to buy gifts. Some will spend time in the kitchen to make cookies or special treats. Many people will go to churches for a special service. Is that enough to be truly prepared?

Where should we go to prepare for Christmas!

First, by God's Word we go to the desert to hear John. Our verses state: *"It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'-- 'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'"* (v. 2-4) John had a unique calling from God to prepare people for the coming Savior. He did not begin by praising the people, but showed them that instead of being on the straight path to God, they had taken every crooked path away from His love. Their paths would lead them to a God angry over their sins. We need to ask: Are we on the right path? Today, many people wouldn't accept John's pointed comments about their sinful lives. Yet at his time, John's message as a prophet of God struck a chord in lives of many people. How do we know?

We read, *"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."* (v.5) Some of us have driven a long distance to buy Christmas items or gifts. Some have gone to the stores in early morning to get a good deal. Why would people at John's time walk 20 – 60 miles through wilderness to see him? It wasn't his new line of clothing, a camel's hair garment. He was not offering a self-improvement course of how to win friends. John spoke God's threats of punishment to the people. There had been no prophet of God like him for 400 years! Just seeing John, who must have been an intense man, would be reason enough to make the trip!

But John offered much more! He let people know their status with God. All the people, no matter what their social status, were under God's judgment. The Lord was coming to judge all, for all had sinned. God expected that at least His followers be wholly devoted to Him with perfect love in their lives.

How many of us can claim perfect faithfulness to God? If not perfect, how many of us think that our goodness has had some influenced God's love for us? Both are wrong! Everything we do is tainted by sin and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags to God. We owe our creator God everything! But, we don't respond as we should. Remember when Peter was fishing in a boat with Jesus, and by a miracle Jesus provided 2 boatloads of fish? How did Peter react? *"He fell at Jesus' knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!' For he and all his companions were astonished...."* (Luke 5:8-9) He was in the presence of God's Son. He knew that he didn't deserve any blessings but rather judgment for his sins.

So, John's preaching in the wilderness led people to admit their sins and repent. And, as we hear God's Word, we too will know our holy God will hold us accountable. Did you ever do something wrong and then you had to wait for your punishment? As a young child, I broke a window and had to wait until my dad got home for punishment. We all feel that sense of guilt when compare our lives to God's demands in His Word: to love and not be selfish and to forgive all and not to hold a grudge. Our sin brings guilt. With guilt comes punishment by God. And with that punishment comes Christmas! *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23)

Second, despite our sin, God has come to us as our Savior! Our verse states, “*John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*” (v.4) People who received God’s Word through John confessed their sins. The word confess doesn’t mean make a long list of all the bad things we have done. The word means to agree with the charge or verdict against us. The people pled guilty after hearing John! If God’s Word tells us that we deserve to suffer forever, we should not make excuses or hide our sins or try to run away from God. We cannot escape on our own! We should agree with His Word that that is what we deserve because of sinful lives. If this is how we think, thank God, because God has convinced us of this truth! John promised that Jesus would send the *Holy Spirit*. (v.8) The Spirit has led us to Christ: “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.*” (1 John 1:9) Having come to Christ, we believe His Word: “*Your sins are forgiven.*” In Christ we boldly say: We’re not guilty! Jesus has taken away our sins and they will never be found, not even by God. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

With Christ’s forgiveness, also comes a change. At Christmas, we see outward changes around us. Dark streets have lights. Plain areas are covered with decorations. Music, parades, and gift-giving fill our land. God is also making changes in us. He has replaced that Grinch-like heart with the love of Christ. He gives us a new life. Remember in the story “The Christmas Carol,” Ebenezer Scrooge was given a new outlook on life by looking at his past empty life, his present harmful life, and his future judgment. He changed when he was given a second chance. God has not come to haunt us with past sins. He came to tell us that His Son took the punishment for every sin we’ve done. John called Jesus “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1:29) As the Lamb, Jesus was sacrificed once for all!

The Holy Spirit works changes in our hearts and minds by His message. Since God sees us in Christ as having no sin and a perfect life, that is how we are to live. When people confessed their sins to John and were baptized to receive forgiveness, it changed their lives i.e. soldiers didn’t extort money. Paul wrote the same change through our baptism, “*Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... we too may live a new life.*” (Romans 6:3-4) Paul also called baptism “*a renewal and rebirth through the Holy Spirit.*” (Titus 3:5) We have no reason to return to old sins at Christmas. We approach the future with optimism as Christ encourages us through His saving Word.

Through faith in Christ, we know that the Kingdom of God is within us! The Holy Spirit has made His home in us to keep our faith alive and to motivate us in Christ to serve God and to love each other. We know what love is. Through God’s Word have gone to the cross and have seen our Lord of love take away the sins of the world We have gone to the empty tomb and are sure that because Jesus lives, we also shall live! This is why we celebrate at Christmas!

There’s nothing wrong with doing traditional things at Christmas: traveling, decorating, looking at lights, or buying presents. These have their place. But, we cannot let these outward signs take the place of hearing John’s message of repentance and going to the manger to see the love of God in a little child born to save us! Christ has come to us. He is the Gift who keeps giving the gift of eternal life! With these words in our hearts, we will be prepared for Christmas no matter where we go! Amen.