

Preparing the Soil

by Travis Dean
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Growing up in Virginia I enjoyed **gardening**. We used around 5 acres each year to grow our garden. We grew field corn, sweet corn, watermelon, pumpkins, potatoes, and many other kinds of vegetables. We used natural fertilizers and pesticides, such as horse manure, tea tree oil, and “**potato beetle squashers**” (our hands). Each spring we began our gardening season by preparing the soil. For several years we depended on a local farmer. He had the right equipment: a **tractor** along with a plow and disc. After a while my dad bought his own tractor, disc, and plow. I learned how to drive a stick shift on my dad’s tractor. But every year we had to start by plowing and disking the soil. After sitting unused for several months, it always had to be loosened up before we could plant anything.

Today we will learn how God prepares the soil in our HEARTS.

Last week we learned that Jesus Christ came to this earth as a King. He came to establish a kingdom in the hearts of men and women. We learned that in Bible times citizens of a country would repair roads in preparation for the arrival of their king. In the same way we will learn today how God sought to prepare His people’s HEARTS to receive their King, Jesus Christ.

Let’s turn to **Mark 1:4**. Preceding these verses, Mark has quoted from two Old Testament prophecies which refer to a “messenger” and a “voice” in the wilderness. This “messenger” or “voice” prepares the way for the Lord, namely, the promised Messiah. Let’s now **read** verses 4 - 6 of Mark 1. Mark mentions here the name of a man called John. He doesn’t tell us much about John, possibly because those Mark was writing to were already familiar with him. Some of us may not be as familiar with John so we will spend some time briefly getting to know who this John is. (Later, if you would like to spend more time reading about John, I would encourage you to read Luke chapter 1.) He is not the disciple John, who wrote the gospel of John. The John referred to here in Mark is commonly known as John the Baptist. He was born only 6 months before Jesus was born. His parents were Zacharias and Elizabeth. Like Mary, they were told by an ANGEL what to name their child. Why did God choose to name him John? Well, we don’t know for sure, but it does have a rich meaning. It is derived from the Hebrew name Johanan, which means “favored by the Lord”.

Well, scholars believe John’s parents probably lived in **Hebron**. It was located in Judea, about 25 miles south of Jerusalem. Zacharias and Elizabeth are described as “righteous” and “blameless”. John’s home life, then, was certainly a blessing and one that prepared him for his call as a messenger of the Lord. **Luke** writes about John in **chapter 1 verse 80**. Let’s read it together. Both Zacharias and Elizabeth were elderly when John was born (Elizabeth had been barren), so it is likely they passed away while John was still young. It seems that they did not enroll John in the rabbinical schools of his day. They most likely taught him at home. But after they passed away, John moved into the “deserts”. Others, such as Moses, had been prepared by God for their calling in the deserts as well.

Let's turn back to Mark and read **verse 6**. Mark here describes for us John's attire and diet. He wore a long, outer garment that was woven with **camel's hair**. He also had a leather belt (probably of sheep or goat skin) around his waist. Why did John dress like this? Well, turn with me to **2 Kings 1:8**.

(This verse is in the middle of an interesting story. The king of Israel has fallen through the floor of the upper room in his house. He is seriously injured and sends messengers to find out if the god of Ekron (Baal-Zebub) thinks he will survive. God tells Elijah to go meet the messengers as they are on their way to Ekron, and ask them if they are going there because there is no god in Israel. He also is to tell them that the king will not survive, but will die. Well, the messengers, upon hearing this, turn around and go back to the king. They don't know who Elijah is, so the king asks them to describe him. And that's where we will pick up the story in verse 8.)

There is no way to be sure if this description means Elijah was a hairy man or if he simply wore a hairy garment. But the similarity between the appearance of Elijah and John the Baptist is striking. And it reveals that the **WORK** of John the Baptist was also strikingly similar to that of Elijah. We will see this a little later. According to Zechariah 13:4, by the time the Israelites had come out of Babylonian captivity, the common dress for a prophet was a robe of course hair. So, John's attire revealed the work God had called him to do involved that of a prophet.

Mark also tells us in chapter 1 verse 6 what John's diet was. He ate locusts and honey. There is no way to know for sure if the "locusts" here refer to the insect or to the carob bean. The significance of his diet is that it was simple and natural. It was in contrast to the elaborate diet that many people at that time were consumed with. Similarly, Elijah had a very simple diet. At one time he was fed by ravens. It is not likely they brought him a five course meal!

Now that we know a little about John, let's now consider his ministry. Let's read **verses 4 & 5 of Mark chapter 1**. Mark says John came baptizing in the wilderness. Matthew says this was the "**wilderness of Judea**". It was located between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. This area is made up of rugged and barren hills. Little rain falls here, and few people live here. This is probably the same area that Luke refers to describing where John lived before his ministry began. In verse 5 Mark says John was baptizing in the Jordan River. The wilderness of Judea borders the Jordan River just north of the Dead Sea. So, this is most likely where John began his ministry.

Mark says that John began his ministry baptizing people. The Greek word here, translated "baptize", means "to immerse" or "to dip". This word was used by the Greeks to refer to the immersing of a piece of clothing in a dye, or to refer to the submerging of a container in order to fill it with water. The practice of baptizing, or dipping someone under the water, did not originate with John. There is evidence in Jewish writings from the first century that it was an established practice by this time. It was used for Jewish converts. When someone wanted to become a Jew, they were baptized. So, the practice of baptism was not original with John, but his **USE** of baptism **DOES** seem original. Notice in **verse 5** that the people coming to be baptized are from the land of Judea and Jerusalem. They are **JEWS**. Why would John call for Jews to be baptized?

That's a great question, and that leads us into the final aspect of John's ministry for today. Mark says in verse 4 that John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. What is repentance? The word means

“to think differently after” or “to change one’s mind”. What do we think differently about? Or what do we change our mind about? SIN. Turn with me to **Acts 5:30, 31**. After we experience repentance, we no longer see our sins in the same way. The Holy Spirit changes our mind toward sin. (READ) Just as God gives us forgiveness, He also gives us repentance. Both of them are gifts from God. Repentance is a miracle that I can’t explain. I used to love it when people put me on a pedestal. It made me feel good. It fed my pride. But now God has changed my mind about this. He has given me a different perspective. To think one person is better than another is foolishness. We are all sinners. We have all sinned. We all need the grace of God poured out on us in Jesus Christ.

Well, the people in Jerusalem and throughout Judea were moved by John’s message of repentance. The Holy Spirit moved their hearts. They came by the hundreds confessing their sins. This was an incredible time in Israel’s history. It had been about 400 years since a prophet had been in Israel. Now a man has come dressed like Elijah, like a prophet. He’s preaching in the power of the Spirit, rebuking sin and calling for repentance and revival.

What was all this for? Why did God at this time raise up John to preach repentance and baptize? Well, **(1)** it meant that in God’s eyes they were no better than the heathen. As we learned, up to this point baptism had always been for the heathen who wanted to become Jews. Now through John, God was calling the JEWS to be baptized. They had fallen so far from God and fallen so deep into sin, that they needed to repent and be baptized just as much as the heathen. They needed God’s forgiveness. There is a **second** reason God called John to preach a baptism of repentance. It prepared the soil of their hearts for their King. Their King was coming to establish His kingdom in their hearts. But their hearts had become hardened. They were like fallow ground. Their hearts needed to be loosened up and cultivated by repentance.

Repentance prepares us for our King.

Our King is coming back again. He is coming a second time. Who believes this more than Seventh-day Adventists? Seventh-day Adventists started out as a group of mostly young people in the 1800’s who believed that Jesus was coming as King in THEIR LIFETIME. I believe with all my heart that this is still what a true Seventh-day Adventist lives like. I believe a true Seventh-day Adventist lives like Jesus is coming as a King the second time... in THEIR lifetime. IS He going to come back in our lifetime? I don’t know. None of us know. But we LIVE like He is. How do we live like He is? One way is by allowing the Holy Spirit to loosen up the soil of our hearts, to respond to His conviction of sins in our lives with repentance.

As a Seventh-day Adventist I can’t play games with sin in my life. I can’t say it doesn’t matter, because I’m saved by grace. If the soil of my heart is fallow and uncultivated, I am unprepared for my King. “Everyone else is doing it” is not an option anymore. Comparing myself with others is perilous. I must ask God like David did: “Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” **(Ps 139:23, 24)** I want to be ready for my King. I not only want the gift of forgiveness. I want the gift of repentance that BRINGS forgiveness. I want to live like He’s coming in MY lifetime.