

# John the Baptist in prison

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[ 0 : 00 ] Will you turn with me now for a little time as we meditate together in a portion we have read from God's word. The gospel of Christ by Mark and the first chapter.

And shall we read from verse 14. Now, after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God and saying, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent ye and believe the gospel. Repent and believe the gospel. It is highly significant that in a Markian account of our Lord's ministry, it begins on this note.

We are not to assume that these were the very first words that our Lord spoke. For the different evangelists give their own different accounts of his ministry.

But in Mark's account of his ministry, these were the very first words that gripped him. And the very first words that he records as coming from the Savior's lips.

[ 1 : 17 ] Repent and believe the gospel. Now then, repentance and faith, which is what we have in these words. Repentance and faith, they stand at the center of the Christian gospel.

They are twins in the operations of divine grace and they cannot be separated. Much discussion, as we know, has centered around which of them takes precedence in the souls of men.

And very many words have been spoken and many arguments have been pursued in this connection. But the supreme question is surely not which takes precedence, but whether they are in exercise on the part of men and women.

Whether they are exercising repentance towards God and faith towards the Lord Jesus Christ. Now then we find in scripture, in the word of God, that the work of grace is represented in different ways. It is represented by way of sovereignty. It is, according to the scriptures, it is the work of God. It is the sovereign work of the God of heaven himself.

[ 2 : 48 ] It is represented by way of precept. That is, as being the duty of man. God calling and God commanding man to repent and believe.

And thus, the duty of man to do this. And it is also represented as the fruit of prayer. That which God gives in response to the cry and to the prayer of the sinner.

God be merciful to me. And so then we ask ourselves this evening for a little. How are we to reconcile these different aspects of scripture as they are brought to our notice?

Is there inconsistency in the teaching of the word of God? Well, we believe not. We are certain there isn't. But these truths are nevertheless underlined and underscored in the course of the teachings of God's word.

First of all, repentance and faith as represented as the work of God. Represented as the sovereign activity of the God of heaven.

[ 4 : 15 ] And this is very fully stated throughout the scriptures in different parts. And, of course, because of this in our own confessional standards.

There are simply two very definitive texts of scripture that I will leave with you in this connection. There are many, many more.

But I leave with you these two very definitive texts. One in the Old Testament and one in the New. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, we find one of those in the prophecy of Ezekiel.

And in chapter 36. And where God is represented there as speaking and saying, A new heart also will I give you.

And a new spirit will I put within you. And I will take the stony heart out of your flesh. And I will give you a heart of flesh. God very distinctly speaking and saying that he will do a certain notable work.

[ 5 : 21 ] I will perform this great and glorious activity. And, of course, we have the well-known passage in Ephesians chapter 2.

Where the apostle there speaks and says, By grace are you saved through faith. And as if that were not enough, he goes on to say, And that not of yourselves.

It is the gift of God. You are saved by grace. But that grace is not of yourselves. It is the gift of God, not of works. Lest any man should boast.

For we are his workmanship. Created in Christ Jesus unto good works. So we have these two very definitive texts in scripture.

One from the Old Testament. One from the New. In order to underscore and underline this truth. That repentance and faith, or the work of grace, is God's work.

[ 6 : 22 ] And as I said, because the scriptures so clearly teach this, their confessional standards also underline these truths.

Repentance unto life is a saving grace. Whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth with grief and hatred turn from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.

But it is a grace. So similarly with, in the answer, with regard to faith in Jesus Christ.

It says the catechism, it is a saving grace. Whereby we receive and we rest upon him alone for salvation. As he has offered to us in the gospel.

He enlightens our minds. And renews our will. And persuades us and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ.

[ 7 : 28 ] As he has offered to us in the gospel. Now that we know that the salvation of grace, to which reference is made here, is variously referred to in God's work.

It is spoken of in different terms. It is spoken of as a creation. It is referred to as a resurrection. It is spoken of as a regeneration.

Or a new birth. And also as an enlightening. All these words are used in order to describe what this work is.

And all these things must refer to divine sovereignty only. You see, creativity, it belongs to God alone.

We speak of men who are talented in certain directions. We speak of them as being creative in their particular talent.

[ 8 : 37 ] In giving expression to their particular talent. And especially if they are very original in what they are doing. We speak of them as being creative. And up to a sense, this is very true.

At the same time, we have to remember that in the course of the lives of these men, many influences were brought to bear during their lives.

Influences of which they themselves know little. And influences which were brought to bear on them unconsciously in giving expression to their talent.

And so, in the strictest sense of the usage of that word, creation, it is something that is unique.

It is something that is new. And in this sense, no mere man is creative. Only the creator. And so, the term that is used in reference to the salvation of grace is given to us as a, I say, creation.

[ 9 : 45 ] A new creation in Christ Jesus. A new man in Christ. All things are passed away. All things are become new.

There is this newness emphasized and underscored again and again in the word of God. So, you see, creativity, it belongs to God alone.

Likewise with resurrection. Resurrection is supremely a divine work. A work that can only, that is unknown in human experience.

Man cannot resurrect. Although he can do many things. Our Lord demonstrated his power over death. Over physical death.

As we know, as we read from the Gospels and in his ministry, we have the notable case of Lazarus, who was called out of the grave.

[ 10 : 43 ] He exercised his power, his authority, over death. And he said with reference to his own life, I have authority to lay down. I have authority to take it again.

This commandment have I received of my father. And it is this authority, this power, that is exercised by God.

When he brings a soul from death, spiritual death, to life. You hath he quickened or brought to life, who were dead in trespasses and in sins.

So Paul puts this matter. So, you see, resurrection is supremely a divine work. Likewise with regeneration. Regeneration is the instilling of the seed of life by God.

See, even the normal usage of this word, regeneration, in the normal usage of this word, regeneration, this matter is carried out, outwith the agent upon which it acts, whether it be a piece of land or whatever.

[ 12 : 05 ] The regeneration must come from outwith itself because it has no inherent power to work a regeneration within itself.

And thus the word of God speaks of the grace of the gospel, of the life that comes into the soul as a life that is instilled by God.

The regenerating power of God at work. And so it is with enlightening. Enlightening is alone a divine activity.

Enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ. Enlightening our minds so far as we ourselves are concerned in a lost condition.

God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, says the apostle, has shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ as it was in a physical order when God created the world.

[ 13 : 15 ] So it is in a spiritual. It is he who brings light into the region of spiritual darkness. So you see, in whatever direction we look in God's word, and that must be our supreme authority, we find that God is sovereign in this activity.

So repentance and faith, which of course are part of the overall work of God, they are represented to us as his work, as a sovereign activity of God himself.

But then again, in the second place, we see also that in Scripture, repentance and faith, or the work of grace, is represented to us as the duty of man, or as I said earlier, by way of precept.

Men are commanded to believe, or to do this, to execute this work in themselves.

Take the words before us, the words of old text, repent and believe the gospel. Came as the precept of our Lord, to those who were listening to him.

[ 14 : 34 ] Again, we turn to the Old Testament for a definitive statement on this aspect of repentance and faith. And again, we find it in Ezekiel and chapter 18, where we have that very clear command given to us, make you a new heart.

You make a new heart. This is your duty, and this is your privilege. Peter, remember, on the day of Pentecost, when so many thousands were added to the church, he spoke in similar terms when those men convicted under his ministry cried out, men and brethren, what shall we do?

Repent, they said, and believe the gospel. And so then, we ask what intended to serve in the work that God is performing in the hearts and in the lives of men.

We cannot avoid them, we cannot escape them, they are presented to us, we see them before us, and we must deal with them. What, I ask, purpose are they intended to serve?

Well, for one thing, they are surely intended to utterly undermine our self-confidence. To utterly undermine our self-confidence with regard to the things of God and our ability to handle these matters.

[ 16 : 15 ] You see, there is nothing that is so certain about man himself than how utterly confident he is with regard to himself until he is decided from on high.

He needs no props, he needs no help in performing what he conceives to be his duty. He is able to stand on his own two feet without any help from any.

I think perhaps one of the best scriptural lessons teaching us this is the parable of the prodigal son.

There is represented to us by your Lord himself a young man brilliant full of self-confidence, so confident in himself and so confident of the outcome of events for him that he was determined to turn his back upon everything that had previously been his support and stand on his own feet.

Well, there is nothing wrong, my friend, in being, in standing on our own feet. There is nothing wrong in being independent. But, ah, when a man seeks to become independent of the God of heaven, everything is wrong.

[ 17 : 41 ] And he has gone drastically astray for the mansions that he can dispense with God himself. And the prodigal son found out how far he had gone amiss when he found himself lost in a far-off country.

And so, confronted with such texts of scripture as these, it has, I believe, in the hands of the Spirit of God, this effect of undermining a man's confidence in himself and casts him upon the mercy of heaven.

It also has the effect, I believe, of acquainting a man with the totality of his impotence with regard to performing the will of God.

Ah, yes, he is called upon to make him a new heart. He is required to repent and believe the gospel. But as he looks at himself and as he reckons with matters, he is totally at a loss as to how this can be done. And he finds himself unable to do it.

[ 19 : 03 ] Remember the case of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus asking him a question, good master, what good things shall I do that I may inherit eternal life? And from the context, we can clearly see that the rich young ruler did many things.

And from probably in his own esteem, he had done all that he needed, was needed of him in order to inherit eternal life.

But our Lord, when our Lord turned round and said to him, one thing thou lackest, he turned and went away sorrowful, because he had neither the will or the strength to take up his cross and follow, Jesus Christ.

he had neither the will nor the strength, and what had been brought to him did not affect him in any way, nor did he realize that he was impotent in himself and had to depend upon divine power and divine grace alone.

So I suggest that these passages of scripture, when they are presented to us, they are intended of God. to cast us in our helplessness upon himself, in order to be carried by him, to be saved by him.

[ 20 : 32 ] Salvation is of grace, and of grace, and by grace alone. And when by the grace of God and the operation, the activity of God's spirit, this is brought home to a man, then he begins to be in want.

he begins to look in this direction and that direction to say, what must I do? Where can I turn? Who do I look to? And that brings us to our third main head, namely, repentance and faith, represented as the fruit of prayer.

prayer. You see, prayer results from a man being apprised of his inability to do what he is commanded to do, what God requires of him.

In the past week, as we all know to our sorrow, poor people were drowned on the promenade at Blackpool. although valiant efforts were made to save them.

And according to certain reports, they were lost, they were drowned, because the lifebuoys or the ropes attached to the lifebuoys were insufficient to reach them in the condition, in the critical state in which they found themselves.

[ 21 : 58 ] can you for one moment imagine these men and the woman who was drowned with them, can you for a moment imagine them not crying, not crying out to the rescuers, throw us a lifeline, throw us a lifeline, can you imagine them for a moment refusing to grasp that lifeline if it came within their reach, you cannot.

And tragically because the rescue operations were unavailing, they were lost. And I suggest that here we have a good illustration of what happens when a man is apprised of his lostness.

He begins to call, he begins to cry, he begins to pray and consistently throughout the word of God this is what is represented to us with regard to this matter.

Take one or two scriptural examples as we have them brought before us in the scriptures. There is the account of the publican, you remember. Our Lord says in that teaching that two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, the other a publican.

and then he goes on to show the contrast between those two men. The Pharisee stood by himself afar off and said, I thank thee, O God, that I am not as other men are, and so forth.

[ 23 : 41 ] The publican, on the other hand, he couldn't as much as lift his eyes to heaven. He smote upon his breast and said, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. And our Lord said, with regard to that man, he went down to his house justified.

You see the connection? There was repentance and there was faith, because it had been born home to this man, that he was helpless, and that his deliverance depended on supernatural divine power, reaching out and grasping him, God, be merciful to me, the sinner.

He went down to his house justified, rather than the other. There is the case of the publican. There is of course the classical case of the prodigal.

We so often and so frequently refer to it, but it is such a good illustration of the work of grace that we cannot refrain from mentioning it again.

He went away, as you know, full of confidence, brimful of self-assurance what he wouldn't do, was no man's business.

[ 24 : 53 ] But then there came a moment when he began to be in want. And when he began to be in want, after having come to himself and seeing his lost condition, he began to think of his father's house.

He began to think of the servants in the father's house. They had enough to spare. prayer. And then he began to formulate a prayer, as he thought of going back.

Very difficult thing to go back. It's a very difficult thing to repent. And only by the grace of God can a man repent. But they began to formulate his prayer.

And he said, I will rise and I will go to my father and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven. And he arose and he came to his father, we read. And the account goes on to say that he said, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee.

And that is as far as he got. You see, there was repentance and there was faith. As a result of having his own self-confidence utterly taken from him, he began to cry to the God who was alone, the father who was alone, able to deliver him from his misery and from his death, from his spiritual death.

[ 26 : 17 ] There is the case of Cornelius in the 10th chapter, I think, of the Acts of the Apostle, the Roman Gentile, of whom we read there, praying, and praying, no doubt, we have no question about that, praying under a sense of need, God answering his prayer by telling him what to do.

Peter being commanded to go to him and to preach to him the liberating gospel of the grace of God. And the sequel to all that was that he and his household were baptized thereupon.

he cried to God in his distress and God heard him. And of course, there is also the classical case of the Philippian jailer, the hard-hearted, cruel man who had put the feet of Paul and Silas in his stocks and then went off to bed thinking that he would have a restful and comfortable night.

But at midnight, he woke from his slumbers and he was a very different man. There was something by his time, there was something agitating him.

He was recognizing that far from being the happy man he thought he was, he was a man who was miserable in the extreme. And we see him coming quickly and casting himself down before the apostles and saying, men and brethren, what must I do to be saved?

[ 27 : 54 ] And he got his answer immediately, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Repentance and faith. This is, my friends, is we believe how God works, his marvelous works, in respect to men and women in need.

Our Lord says, repent, and believe the gospel. And so let me ask you, my friend, as I conclude, let me ask you, do you accept the sovereignty of God in the matter of salvation?

Well, if you accept the teachings of the word of God, you will and you must accept that God is sovereign, that God is supreme, that God is absolute in the work which he carries out in any soul. But never, never, never make that a cushion on which you can lie contemptedly because you have your obligation and I have mine.

You have your duty and I have mine. and so along with that, as I ask you, do you accept the sovereignty of God in the matter of salvation? I ask you also, do you accept that you have an obligation, a duty to save yourself?

[ 29 : 20 ] Do you believe that the priest, God's precept, comes to you and is placed before you to repent and believe the gospel, to make yourself a new heart?

Do you believe it? That is your duty. And as a consequence of that, if you are properly exercised under it, do you pray that God, in your desperate condition, the desperate condition you are in, would come to deliver you?

Do you cry to him for deliverance? For deliverance comes, salvation comes, in the wake of the sinner crying, of the sinner praying, and the sinner saying, God, be merciful to me, the sinner. I leave the words with you. As I trust I take them to myself, repent, and believe the gospel. Seek to know whether this exercise of grace has commenced in you.

Repentance, faith. If it hasn't, my friend, let not this night pass before casting yourself at the footstool of divine mercy, pleading that his power might be operated in you, in order to make you willing in a day of his power.

[ 30 : 52 ] for your duty is to believe and to repent and to believe the gospel. Amen. May he add his blessing.

Shall we unite in prayer? Oh, Lord our God, do thou draw us, we beseech thee, to where thou art. And do thou grant that in the experience of each of us a day of thy power would be known. so that recognizing that day and recognizing what thou art active, recognizing that thou art active in us, we may, by thy grace, submit and respond to what thou art doing.

Oh, Lord, we thank thee that thou hast not left this work to man or to angel, but, and wilt not give this glory to any. Thou will keep it in thine own hands, and we pray thee to glorify thy name by bringing many here and around us to the exercise of repentance toward thee and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be with us as we join in singing our parting song at this time. Go before us, O God, into the duties of the week upon which we have entered. Glorify thy name in our lives.

[ 32 : 19 ] Hide thy faith from all our sin, for we ask it in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.