

The battle begins

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[0 : 00] As Jesus was coming up out of the water, heaven was torn open, and the Spirit of God descended on Him, anointing Him and empowering Him as God's long-promised and by some long-awaited messianic king. He is the one. He is the king of Israel. He is the king of kings, and at His baptism He is recognized as such by heaven itself. And what happens next? Is it a regal procession into Jerusalem, as might seem fitting for such a king? Is it a day of national celebration?

Do the great and the good from across Israel, in all their finery, bow down before the king and joyful acknowledgement of His sovereign majesty? None of that happens. Rather, the king is driven by the very Spirit who had anointed him into the wilderness. How can that be? What is going on?

There must be some mistake that this king, in whom Almighty God is well pleased, should be so anointed to then be led into the desert, into the wilderness, to be with the wild animals and be tempted by Satan. To maybe try and sense the seeming incongruity of it all, just imagine that you were there in the wilderness. Let's say towards the end of the 40 days.

You're there, but you know nothing about the man who is before you. You know nothing about Jesus. You know nothing about the events surrounding His baptism. You're simply there observing what is going on.

When somebody approaches you and asks, who is that guy? What would you answer to that passerby who posed you that question? Who is he? Well, I guess you would respond, I don't know. He's just some guy, some crazy guy.

But then the passerby might further probe you and say, but what's going on? Is it important what's going on there with that man?

[3 : 00] Is there any significance to the words? He seems to be speaking under his breath. And you smile with an ironic smile. You say, significant, important, him, that? If you think he's significant, you're as crazy as he is. Well, would you be right to answer the stranger's questions in that way?

That is what would appear. But of course, you would be so wrong. But what is going on in the wilderness?

What is going on in the desert to where Jesus is led, driven, thrust by the Spirit? What is so significant about the strange drama unfolding before you? Well, the desert, the wilderness, is a stage. It's a theater of war. It's a battlefield. Maybe that's the best word we can use to describe the wilderness to where Jesus was led, a battlefield. And on that battlefield, the greatest battle ever fought begins. Mark seems to say so little. His account is so short, so little. And the way of detail, Luke and Matthew tell us a great deal more about what happened there in the wilderness.

And yet, though, his account is few in words. Every word points to the nature of the battle that raged, a battle that raged far from prying human eyes. And yet, I'm sure, witnessed by forces unseen, who were gripped by every twist and turn. Let me tell you about the battle fought that day in that barren wilderness, over those 40 days that Jesus was in the wilderness.

Even from the few words that Mark provides for us, we can draw out a number of aspects and realities of that battle fought. It was a battle that Jesus had to fight. The battle marked the beginning of his kingly duties. He was a king anointed to fight and conquer. His duties were not the genteel duties associated with monarchy today. Open community centers and visit the commonwealth and receive flowers from little girls. No, those were not his kingly duties. His kingly duty was to fight and to conquer.

[6 : 03] The very first word that Mark employs points to the urgency of the confrontation. We read there in verse 12, at once the Spirit sent him out into the desert immediately. He has only just been anointed.

His clothing still drips from the waters of the Jordan, and yet immediately he must go into the wilderness to begin to fight the battle that he was sent to fight. There was not a moment to lose. This was the appointed time, appointed and determined in eternity itself. The battle must begin. And the Spirit didn't gently direct Jesus in the direction of the wilderness. Rather, he thrust him into battle. The verb that Mark employs there in verse 12 that we have translated, at once the Spirit sent him out into the desert.

It's a word that is almost violent in its force. He was thrust into battle. Not that Jesus was a reluctant participant. But nonetheless, the occasion demanded that he be thrust to the fray.

He was ready, and he was willing to do battle. It was a battle that Jesus had to fight. And it was a battle that we see even in the brief account given to us by Mark. It was a battle between two mighty foes. In the red corner, Jesus, the King of heaven. In the blue corner, Satan, the King of this world, as he is sometimes described even by the gospel writers. This was a battle announced in Eden. We read in Genesis chapter 3 of how God at the dawn of time in the light of man's rebellion, tempted by this same foe who we meet here in the wilderness. God established an implacable enmity between the serpent, between Satan, and the seed of the woman. An enmity that would in time lead to a battle of cosmic proportions and significance. And now was the time. The bell had rung. Let battle commence. And yet, if anybody had been watching, just as I encourage you to imagine a few moments ago, if anybody had been watching, all they would have seen was one crazy guy mumbling to himself.

But behind the veil of our limited sensory perception, a battle began to rage. And remember that as we journey through the gospel, so often there will be more going on than meets the eye, as was the case here in the wilderness, as King Jesus battled with Satan. And this battle, and here there is a very important significance to the location. This battle was fought by Jesus very much in what we would call enemy territory. This was very much an away fixture for Jesus. You may have seen, if you're interested in football and European matches, when football teams travel to play Galatasaray. It's a Turkish team that play in Istanbul.

[10:07] And famous for the hostile reception that is afforded to visiting a team. They're met by a huge and foreboding banner bearing just three words across the whole of one of the stands. These three words, welcome to hell. And as the players make their way onto the pitch and tremble, they know that this is very much an away fixture. Well, such a banner would not have been so out of place as Jesus was thrust into battle in the wilderness. This was the territory of his foe. Satan is a creature of the wilderness. The wilderness speaks of the consequences of the consequences of the fall. It is a place of danger and hostility. It is a place where wild animals roam and devour the weak and the vulnerable.

And it is here that Jesus must fight his kingly battle. The battlefield itself, the wilderness, brings to mind and into contrasting relief previous battles fought and lost in the history of redemption.

There is the contrast with the garden of Eden at the very beginning. There our first father, acting as our representative head, fought the same foe.

And Adam fought in a garden, a pristine garden, surrounded by bountiful provision for his every need. He fought in a garden where he presided over tame animals at his beck and call.

He fought in a rife. He fought in a rife. He fought in a rife. He fought in that garden, and he tasted bitter defeat. And with Adam, we all fell.

[12:18] The second Adam fights the same foe, but he fights in the wilderness, surrounded by the wild animals.

There is a contrast, too, in the experience of Jesus in the wilderness with the experience of God's people in the wilderness following their deliverance from Egypt.

There for 40 years, they were tested and fell short time and time again. They failed, and they failed, and they failed again.

But Jesus, King Jesus, Israel reduced to one man, returns to the wilderness for 40 days to be tested time and time and time again.

A battle fought on enemy territory, but it was a battle fought for a great prize. What was the prize?

[13:51] To rescue us from the kingdom of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of the Son he loves. In the language that Paul employs to describe what God has done in sending Jesus.

Jesus came to rescue us from the wilderness and welcome us into his kingdom, and in time to live with him in the new heaven and the new earth where righteousness dwells.

Jesus came to the wilderness. But his foe will not surrender meekly before the approaching king. Jesus will have to fight for us.

And in the wilderness, he fought for you. Can you see that? Do you believe that? That what was going on there in the wilderness for those 40 days, he was fighting for you.

He fought not for himself, but for his people, for those he had come to rescue from the dominion of darkness, to rescue from the wilderness.

[14:57] Satan knew that he needed to land just one blow. One blow would suffice if he could tempt Jesus to stray just one inch from the straight path, or lure him for just one second from the way set out for him by the Father.

Then Satan would be victorious. Jesus' saving mission rested on perfect obedience. Anything short of perfect obedience and the whole redemptive enterprise would end in ignominious defeat.

And we, you and me, would be lost, consigned for eternity to the dominion of darkness.

In the clutches of one, possessed of no redeeming features. There in the wilderness, the stakes could not have been any higher.

We were the stakes. It was a battle of unimaginable intensity.

[16:18] The form of the verb employed by Mark here in this brief record that he gives of Jesus' temptation indicates that his temptations were endured throughout the 40 days.

Sometimes that's not altogether clear when we read the temptation accounts. We maybe wonder whether, well, Jesus was fasting for 40 days, and at the end of the 40 days you have this intense period of temptation.

But rather it would seem that throughout the time he was being tempted by Satan. The battle was unremitting. Now Mark chooses to omit any reference to the three specific temptations, almost iconic temptations that are recorded by Matthew and Luke.

Mark's concern, it would seem, is to present with terse brevity, the reality that the whole wilderness experience from start to finish was one of unimaginable intensity.

The blows were delivered thick and fast. One followed another. There was no relief and no respite. Satan brought to bear all his malevolent genius and employed every weapon in his armory.

[17:35] And Jesus fought. Jesus battled. Jesus resisted. Jesus stood firm. And he fought and battled and resisted and stood firm for us, for his people.

But this battle that began in the wilderness, that was indeed just the beginning. Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Mark's account is his silence as regards the outcome of the battle.

You might say, well, it's implied. It's obvious. We know the outcome. And yet it is intriguing that Mark does not tell us what the outcome was. At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, and he was in the desert for forty days, being tempted by Satan.

He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. But if a battle raged, who won? Who emerged victorious from this battle?

We need to know. But Mark says nothing. Is it because Mark did not know the answer? He knew. And I'm sure his readers also knew.

[18:59] I think Mark chooses not to record the victory won by Jesus in the wilderness, because he knows that the battle had only just begun.

In Luke's account, in chapter 4 and verse 13 of Luke's gospel, we have the telling and foreboding words.

When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. More foreboding words it would be difficult to find.

You see, the battle began in the wilderness, but the battle would continue. The battle would continue, and Mark will record it for us.

Indeed, Mark's gospel is characterized by this focus on the battle that Jesus is waging with the evil one. What is the first miracle recorded in Mark's gospel?

[20:01] Well, we have it there in chapter 1 from verse 21. What is it that section entitled? Jesus drives out an evil spirit. What did the evil spirit say to Jesus that led to him then being driven out by Jesus?

We read from verse 23, Just then a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an evil spirit cried out, What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?

I know who you are, the Holy One of God. And then Jesus drove him out. This is where Mark begins in recounting the miraculous acts of Jesus, his battle with the evil one and his hosts.

If you bear with me as we maybe speculate somewhat, I'm struck by the words of the demon to Jesus. Have you come to destroy us?

Might it be that among the demons, the talk was of this battle in the wilderness? Were they among themselves talking? Do you know about this Jesus?

[21 : 11] He confronted our boss, and he was tempted, and he was tested time and time again, and he resisted. Have you ever seen such a man?

Have we ever witnessed such a thing? That a man, a mere man, could resist all the forces that we have at our disposal? Who is this man?

And so when he sees Jesus, this demon, have you come to destroy us? Of course, that is precisely why he had come. And he's driven out the first miracle.

What is the first parable about in Mark's account? Well, we need to turn to chapter 3. We won't think about it or give it any time, but just notice the very first parable that Mark records also concerns Satan and his hosts.

So Jesus called them and spoke to them in parables. How can Satan drive out Satan? And he continues. The language of conflict, the language of the battle.

[22 : 17] Mark focuses on this great reality of what is going on as Jesus comes into the world to battle for us. Now, as we go through the gospel, on the surface, or more often behind the surface, the battle will continue to rage.

We will see the human actors, soft and unwitting pawns of Satan, opposing Jesus at every turn. But sometimes the veil will be drawn, and we will see the enemy face to face.

Perhaps the most vivid example is when Peter is looking to dissuade Jesus from continuing on the path to Calvary. And what does Jesus say to Peter?

Get behind me, Satan. It's as if the veil is drawn for a moment, and we see this big battle that is continuing, that began in the wilderness, but continues throughout.

Jesus is a ministry. A battle that was only just beginning, but of course, a battle that would reach, that had to reach, a deadly conclusion.

[23 : 33] And the battle would reach its deadly conclusion at Calvary, at the cross. Jesus had set His face to Jerusalem, and the cross.

Even as He was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, His face was already set to Jerusalem. The destination was clear, and for three years He maintained the course with unwavering decision.

But the time of His final battle must come, and it came at Calvary outside Jerusalem. Even there, in attempts at evermore smack of desperation, Satan tried to divert Him from the path of obedient and sacrificial love.

What was the cry that rung in the ears of Jesus time and time again as He hung on Calvary? The passersby cried out, Come down from the cross, the chief priests and teachers of the law.

Likewise, come down now from the cross. Come down, come down, come down. Don't die there. But He would not come down.

[24 : 50] Love kept Him there. Love kept Him fighting and battling for you. And He fought that final battle alone.

In the wilderness, Jesus was attended by angels. At Calvary, He was abandoned even by His Father. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me, was His desolate cry.

The battle begun in the wilderness came to its deadly conclusion at Calvary. And flying in the face of all worldly wisdom, it was the dead guy who emerged victorious.

What is that all about? It's the dead guy who is the victor in that final battle at Golgotha. The death of King Jesus was the death blow for King Satan.

As the Father had announced in the garden, the head of the serpent was now crushed. And Satan knew. He knew he was defeated.

[26 : 04] The question posed by the demon three years before, have you come to destroy us? Well, now everybody knew. In the heavenly places, they all knew the outcome of the battle.

The veil, we speak of the veil that sometimes is drawn, that allows us to see behind the surface.

And the veil is drawn also for us by the Apostle Paul as he writes to the believers in Colossae and reveals to us the cosmic conquest that is visibly secured at Calvary.

In chapter 2 of that letter, and in verse 15, we read, as Paul describes the work of Jesus, he writes, and having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Of course, that's not what a passerby would have seen. We need the veil to be drawn to see what is going on. Of course, the victory won was then confirmed and vindicated by the resurrection. A proud father, well pleased with his son, raised him from the grave, triumphant over death and the devil.

[27 : 25] The wilderness, the wilderness of which Mark speaks in such brief and fleeting words, was the beginning of the battle that reached its climax at Calvary.

This was a battle that Jesus fought for you. He conquered the king of this world that he might rescue you from his brutal clutches. What do you have to do in the light of this battle that has been fought, of this battle that has been won by King Jesus?

What you need to do, what you are invited to do, what I would plead with you to do, is to embrace your Savior, embrace your Redeemer, trust in Jesus, and in the victory that he has won on your behalf.

There is no other way that you can escape from the clutches of the evil one, no other way that you can escape from the dominion of darkness. Jesus is the only way. Trust in him.

Trust in what he has done on your behalf. Bow down before the king of heaven. As a subject of the kingdom of Jesus, you too will be called to battle with the enemy, but you battle a defeated foe.

[28 : 45] However ferocious he might appear, and indeed is, he is a defeated foe. He has been crushed, and you fight in the strength of the captain of your salvation.

You will often taste defeat, but you will never be defeated. You will fall, but you will be lifted up again. You will stumble, but you will cross the finishing line in the grip of your Savior, who will never let you go.

Jesus didn't fight the fight he fought. He didn't pay the price he paid to let you go. That is not going to happen.

He will never let you go. And so go into battle and fight the enemy in that security and in that confidence. Jesus has won the victory for you.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we come and we thank you for your Son, Jesus. We thank you for the one anointed King, the one empowered as the King, the one who came to fight for us.

[29 : 58] We thank you for the battle that he waged and for the victory that he won. We thank you for the death that he died. We thank you for your vindicating power and raising him from the grave.

We thank you that even now as we pray, we pray in his name, knowing that he is seated at your right hand, interceding for us. Help us to know what it is to embrace the Savior you have provided for us.

Help us to know what it is to put our trust in him as our Savior and our Lord. Help us to know what it is to live our lives as Christians, battling the battles that you placed before us in the security and the confidence that we do so not in our own strength, but in the strength of the one who has already overcome in our place and on our behalf.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.