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—Joel R. Beeke, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

ST. ANDREW'S EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY

MARK

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R. C. SPROUL



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For Guy and Penny Rizzo,
who love the Word of God

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SERIES PREFACE

When God called me into full-time Christian ministry, he called me to the academy. I was trained and ordained to a ministry of teaching, and the majority of my adult life has been devoted to preparing young men for the Christian ministry and to trying to bridge the gap between seminary and Sunday school through various means under the aegis of Ligonier Ministries.

Then, in 1997, God did something I never anticipated: he placed me in the position of preaching weekly as a leader of a congregation of his people—St. Andrew’s in Sanford, Florida. Over the past fourteen years, as I have opened the Word of God on a weekly basis for these dear saints, I have come to love the task of the local minister. Though my role as a teacher continues, I am eternally grateful to God that he saw fit to place me in this new ministry, the ministry of a preacher.

Very early in my tenure with St. Andrew’s, I determined that I should adopt the ancient Christian practice of *lectio continua*, “continuous expositions,” in my preaching. This method of preaching verse by verse through books of the Bible (rather than choosing a new topic each week) has been attested throughout church history as the one approach that ensures believers hear the full counsel of God. Therefore, I began preaching lengthy series of messages at St. Andrew’s, eventually working my way through several biblical books in a practice that continues to the present day.

Previously, I had taught through books of the Bible in various settings, including Sunday school classes, Bible studies, and audio and video teaching series for Ligonier Ministries. But now I found myself appealing not so much to the minds of my hearers as to both their minds and their hearts. I

knew that I was responsible as a preacher to clearly explain God's Word *and* to show how we ought to live in light of it. I sought to fulfill both tasks as I ascended the St. Andrew's pulpit each week.

What you hold in your hand, then, is a written record of my preaching labors amid my beloved Sanford congregation. The dear saints who sit under my preaching encouraged me to give my sermons a broader hearing. To that end, the chapters that follow were adapted from a sermon series I preached at St. Andrew's.

Please be aware that this book is part of a broader series of books containing adaptations of my St. Andrew's sermons. The title of this series is St. Andrew's Expository Commentary. As you can see, this is more than a convenient title—it is a description. This book, like all the others in the series, will *not* give you the fullest possible insight into each and every verse in this biblical book. Though I sought to at least touch on each verse, I focused on the key themes and ideas that comprised the “big picture” of each passage I covered. Therefore, I urge you to use this book as an overview and introduction, but if you desire to enhance your knowledge of this book of Scripture, you should turn to one or more of the many excellent exegetical commentaries (see my recommendations in the back).

I pray that you will be as blessed in reading this material as I was in preaching it.

—R. C. Sproul
Longwood, Florida
April 2009

PREFACE

The gospel of Mark, I believe, is both overlooked and underappreciated. Tucked away between the longer and more detailed Synoptic Gospels of Matthew and Luke, and lacking the rhetorical flair of John's account, Mark is rarely cited first when preachers and theologians look to bolster their arguments from the accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. If asked, few of us could readily say what makes Mark unique among the gospel accounts.

We need to get to know this little book. Above all, it was inspired by the Holy Spirit and included in the canon of Scripture for our edification. Moreover, it was composed for an audience of Gentiles, probably in the city of Rome itself, meaning it is highly relevant for Christians who lack a Jewish background today. Also, it is valuable for its succinct quality; the book moves quickly and emphasizes things that happened to Jesus in His ministry years.

Perhaps most important, however, Mark takes pains to show that Jesus was the Christ and the Son of God in the flesh. He opens by saying, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1), and everything in the book leads up to Peter's great confession, "You are the Christ" (8:29). In a day and age when the world insists Jesus was at best a great teacher, we desperately need to see and be reminded of these truths. Mark actually seems to downplay Jesus' teaching in order to focus on the power and authority with which He carried out His ministry, demonstrating again and again that He was like no other man. This is a perspective we dare not neglect.

It is my prayer that as you read this collection of thoughts on Mark, your eyes will be opened to the identity of Jesus, and your faith in Him as the Christ and the Son of God will be strengthened.

1

THE COMING OF THE CHRIST

Mark 1:1–8



The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the Prophets: “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.” “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight.’” John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Imagine for a moment that you are a Christian in first-century Rome. You are assembled with your congregation on the Lord’s Day, but not in a church. The persecutions of the Emperor Nero are raging,

and if the authorities discover that you are a believer, you will be arrested and subjected to the death penalty. So you and your fellow believers are gathered underneath the city in the catacombs, surrounded by skeletons and cadavers.

When Nero came to power, he reigned in calmness and with some ability for five years. However, in AD 59, he changed and began to engage in radically cruel and immoral actions. Then, in the year 64, a great fire devastated Rome. It is difficult for us to understand the extent of the destruction that took place as a result of that fire. When it broke out, it spread to seven wards of the city and raged for seven days. No sooner did it appear to be brought under control than it broke out again. Ultimately, it destroyed nearly 80 percent of the city. The devastation that Hurricane Katrina wrought on New Orleans is not worthy to be compared with the damage the fire caused in Rome.

When things like this happen, everyone looks for someone to blame. Many suspected Nero himself had set the fire. To deflect suspicion, Nero chose to blame it on Christians. Word swept through the city that the destruction had been caused by those antisocial, antireligious fanatics who bore the name of Jesus Christ. So Nero sent his military out to round up every Christian he could find. When he arrested the Christians, he clothed them in the skins of wild animals; then, in a public display of cruelty, he let feral dogs loose against them. Thinking they were assaulting wild animals, the dogs attacked the Christians garbed in skins and killed them. Other Christians Nero dipped in pitch or tar and ignited their bodies, using them to illuminate his private gardens. If that was not enough, other Christians were brought into the Colosseum and fed to the lions for entertainment.

In all probability, it was around the year 65, in the immediate aftermath of the great fire, that the first written record of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ appeared—the gospel according to Mark. It is basically a settled matter of historical investigation that the initial audience for this gospel was the Christians suffering persecution in Rome. This gospel reminded them of their salvation in Christ, taught them about the suffering that Jesus Himself experienced, and even revealed that Jesus was driven into the wilderness and was under the threat of wild beasts.

So, imagine yourself in the catacombs, worshiping with a little band of believers. On this Lord's Day, however, the pastor of your congregation comes with a new document. It is the newly written gospel of Mark. You are about to hear the Word of God in the first reading of this gospel.

Authorship and Themes

Though he is not named in the text itself, the author of this gospel is without question John Mark, who was a companion of Paul with Barnabas early in their missionary journeys. Mark was fired by the Apostle Paul and then went on with Barnabas, as Paul went with Silas (Acts 13:5, 13; 15:36–41). Later, Mark was reconciled to Paul and became a valuable comrade to him in the later days of Paul’s apostolic ministry (2 Tim. 4:11). However, men of great importance in the second-century church, such as Papias, Eusebius, and Irenaeus, give a consistent testimony that the work on this gospel was directed largely by the Apostle Peter, for whom Mark served as a secretary. There is some doubt as to whether the gospel was written before or after Peter’s death, but it is virtually certain that Peter gave his stamp of approval to the content.

One of the most marked characteristics of Mark’s gospel is its brevity, the breathtaking pace with which it moves from beginning to end. For instance, there are no details about the birth of Jesus (we find those in Matthew and Luke). Thus, the gospel of Mark is not a biography. It does not give us a chronological account about Jesus, such as we find in Matthew’s gospel. Rather, it might be called a “witness document,” something like a tract that someone would hand out to give a summary of the significant work of Jesus.

One of the most important Greek words in the gospel of Mark is *euthus*, which is translated “immediately” or “straightway.” It is used forty-two times in Mark’s gospel and only twelve times in the rest of the New Testament. My best friend in college and seminary grew up on the mission field in Ethiopia, and he later ministered to people deep in the jungle there. Their principal transportation was a powerboat that was christened *Euthus*. I asked him why they called the boat *Euthus*. He explained: “My Dad was familiar with the Greek New Testament, and he was reading the gospel of Mark one day in the Greek where it said, ‘*Euthus* the boat,’ or, ‘Straightway the boat left the shores of Galilee.’ There it was, *euthus* the boat, so I named my boat *Euthus*.” *Euthus* is certainly a good word to describe Mark’s gospel, for he dives right into his account and moves along swiftly. It seems Mark is in a hurry to give us the major facts about Jesus and His life and ministry.

The facts Mark gives us are included to demonstrate two things: Jesus is the promised Messiah and the Son of God. Mark makes this affirmation at the beginning of his work, saying, **The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God** (v. 1). That is the thematic statement for the entire gospel.

By organizing his material as he did and writing in this style, Mark introduced a new literary genre to the ancient world, the genre that came to be known as “the gospel.” We have the gospel of Mark, the gospel of Matthew, the gospel of Luke, and the gospel of John, and there are other “gospels” that are not canonical, such as the gospel of Peter. The Greek New Testament does not state the title as, for instance, “the gospel of John.” It simply says, *kata Iohannan*, which means “according to John.” Then we have “according to Matthew,” “according to Mark,” and “according to Luke.” We have understood this to mean “*the gospel according to Matthew*,” “*the gospel according to Mark*,” and so on. The word *gospel*, or “good news,” is added because this literary genre is designed to focus attention on the person and work of Christ. Thus, Mark writes, “The beginning of the gospel [the good news] of Jesus Christ.”

Notice that Mark does not simply say he is presenting “the gospel of *Jesus*.” This book drives us relentlessly to the Caesarea Philippi confession (8:27–30), when Jesus said to His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” They replied, “John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then said, “But who do you say that I am?” At that point, Peter, the champion of Mark, gave the great confession: “You are the Christ.” Mark foreshadows this great confession when he affirms that this is the gospel of Jesus *Christ*, which means it is the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, who is also the Son of God.

The Messiah’s Forerunner

Mark then takes us quickly to the Old Testament, which was such an important part of the preaching of the early church. Paul does that constantly when he affirms the character of Jesus and teaches that He was the One of whom the Old Testament authors wrote as the coming Messiah. In the same way, Mark immediately locates the appearance of Jesus in the context of the promised Messiah of the Old Testament by saying, **As it is written in the Prophets** (v. 2a).

He then gives us a summary of three distinct Old Testament texts. One comes from Exodus, one from Malachi, and one from Isaiah. Mark merges them together and writes: **“Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You. The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight”** (vv. 2b–3). These prophecies all foretold that before the Messiah would come, God would send a herald, and that herald’s responsibility would be to prepare the way for the coming Messiah.

The herald would not be the Messiah, but he would be sent by God to announce the coming of the Messiah.

When John the Baptist appeared, there was much discussion about his identity. Many believed he was Elijah come again. Even today, whenever Jews gather for the Passover Seder, there is an empty chair at the table. If you are a guest in the home when they are celebrating the Passover, you might ask: “Did someone who was expected not show up? Why do you have the empty chair?” They will explain to you that the empty chair is there for Elijah. They remember the last prophecy at the close of the Old Testament canon, on the last page of the book of Malachi—the promise that before the Messiah would come, God would bring Elijah back (Mal. 4:5). Elijah, who was caught up into heaven, did not die. God said he would come once more before Messiah would appear. The Jews are still waiting for him.

So, when John the Baptist appeared on the scene of Israel, when he came out of the desert and began to preach after hundreds of years of silence since the last Old Testament prophet, his appearance stirred more national interest than Jesus’ initial appearance. In fact, in some of the literature of the early first century, more attention is given to John the Baptist than is given to Jesus. The people had thought God was finished with prophets, but suddenly a prophet emerged out of the wilderness.

The first question the authorities asked John was, “Who are you? . . . Are you Elijah?” He answered, “I am not” (John 1:19–21). Yet when they asked Jesus who John was, Jesus said he *was* Elijah (Matt. 17:12–13). How do we reconcile these statements? If we look at the whole picture, that conundrum is explained. We are told that John came in the spirit and the power of Elijah (Luke 1:17), and Jesus affirmed that the ministry of Elijah was fulfilled in the work of John the Baptist. It was not that Elijah himself came back, so John was speaking the truth by saying, “No, I am not Elijah.” However, Jesus explained that John ministered in the spirit and power of Elijah.

Notice that one of the prophecies Mark quotes refers to “the wilderness.” In the Old Testament, the traditional meeting place between God and His prophets was always the wilderness. Moses saw the burning bush in the Midianite wilderness. God called a nation to Himself when He brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness. Elijah was ministered to by ravens in the wilderness. That motif goes through the Old Testament, and now Mark begins his New Testament gospel with this strange figure coming out of the desert, out of the wilderness, looking for all the world like Elijah.

The other gospels give us much more information about John the Baptist. For instance, Luke tells us the story of the conception of John the

Baptist and of the announcement of the angel Gabriel to John the Baptist's father, Zacharias. John gives great detail to explain John the Baptist's mission. But Mark goes right to the heart of the matter. He links the Old Testament promise of the forerunner, who was coming to make the path straight for the Messiah, to John the Baptist.

The Message John Proclaimed

Mark writes: **John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins** (vv. 4–5). When John appeared, he came out of the wilderness and addressed the people. Soon, all Judea flocked around him. He was an instant celebrity.

What did John proclaim? He called the people to get ready for the Messiah's coming. He told them they needed to be cleansed from their sins. In other words, they needed to be baptized.

When John began baptizing Israelites, the Pharisees, the conservative religious leaders, objected. They declared that the Israelites, the children of Abraham, the chosen people of God, had no need for cleansing. Baptism was for Gentiles, the unclean ones. That sparked a major controversy. It also set the stage for John's baptism of Jesus, which we will consider in the next chapter.

Mark then adds a brief description of John: **Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey** (v. 6). In his rough clothing and with his somewhat wild appearance, John met the classic image of the prophet.

Finally, Mark relates one of the key truths John taught: **And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose. I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"** (vv. 7–8). In Israel at that time, everyone wore sandals, even aristocrats, and their feet got filthy on the dusty roads. However, it was beneath the dignity of the aristocrats to take off their own sandals and thus get their hands dirty, so they had their slaves do it. But John said he was not even worthy to untie the shoes of the One who was coming after him. He was saying, basically: "Do not get excited about me. Get excited about the One I'm pointing you to, the One who is the Messiah, the One who is the Son

of God. Yes, I'm baptizing you with water, but the One who comes after me will baptize you with the Holy Spirit of power. Your Messiah is coming."

Matthew quotes John as saying, "Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees" (3:10a). In other words, John was saying the Messiah was not just coming sometime in the future, but He was right around the corner. His coming was about to happen. The kingdom was going to break through very shortly.

As those huddled in the catacombs heard anew the message of the preparation for the Messiah, they rejoiced in their certain knowledge that the Messiah had come. Because of their faith in Him, they were willing to gather in secret and, if necessary, to be eaten by dogs, burned as torches in the gardens of Nero, or thrown to the lions. How they loved to hear the story of the coming of the Messiah, the Son of God.