

“The Beginning of the Gospel”

Mark 1:1-8

Let's turn in our Bibles this morning to Mark's gospel, and in just a minute we will read the first eight verses. I began a study of Mark last week and gave you a simple overview of the book. We looked at Mark in terms of both the man himself as well as his message. The author of this gospel account is 'John Mark' who we find mentioned in several places in the New Testament. He had been a missionary companion of Paul and Barnabas, as well as an associate of Peter. Early church history says that Mark served as Peter's interpreter, meaning that he wrote his account of the life and ministry of Jesus from the perspective of Peter. And his overall purpose is to present Jesus as the model Servant who came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.

In recent years, social media 'reels' have become some of the most popular form of digital consumption. Reels are designed to grab a person's attention through a combination of rapid-paced, high-energy visuals, personalized algorithms, and psychological triggers that create an addictive, endless loop of content. They utilize shortened video formats that prioritize immediate engagement within a few seconds to keep users scrolling and watching. Now, I'm not going to debate the value of such things, but I do want you to think of Mark's Gospel like you would a 'reel.' He uses the word 'immediately' to keep the reader's attention. Imagine you live in the first century, and you're hearing this account of the life of Jesus read to you for the first time. By its very design, you're being held in suspense and on the edge of your seat. Mark understood the urgency of the gospel, so he really wastes no time getting his readers into the heart of the story. And so let's see how he begins. (Read)

Suppose I were to ask you, “What is the ‘gospel?’” How might you answer? Some might answer that question in literary terms and say, “Well, it is one of the first four books of the New Testament.” And some might try to answer it in ethical terms. For them, the gospel is about living like Jesus—loving your neighbor, caring for the poor, pursuing justice, and becoming a better person. Even still, some try to answer it in therapeutic terms. They might say it’s about finding peace, purpose, or healing—God helping broken people feel whole again. But the results of the gospel are not to be confused with the gospel itself. And while we may refer to the first four books of the New Testament as the four gospels, and while there are ethical implications associated with the gospel, and the gospel does result in changed, whole lives. But at its very heart the gospel is not literature, it is not ethics, and it is not therapy. The gospel is the announcement of God’s victory over sin in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

In verse 1 of our text, you will find that word ‘gospel’ which is used around 76 times in the New Testament. The Greek word is ‘euangelion’ from which we get ‘evangelism.’ Now, we use this word to describe the first four books of the New Testament, but the word is never used that way in the New Testament itself. Whenever we come across this word, it is always used to refer to the message of salvation. It is good news of salvation which is announced. And it is a word that would have been familiar to those in the first century, both Jews and Gentiles. To the Greek mind, a ‘gospel’ was an announcement of victory by the king over some enemy. As such, it was news intended to be published far and wide so that all the king’s subjects would hear his accomplishment.

Verse 1 says, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark wastes no time nor minces words in establishing the identity of the subject about which he now writes. You may remember from last time that Matthew’s

purpose in writing his Gospel was to present Jesus as the rightful King and heir to David's throne, and he gives us the Nativity story, and the genealogy of the Lord Jesus to show that He is the promised Messiah. Luke's Gospel presents the human nature of the Lord Jesus Christ, and as the Son of Man. In John's Gospel, the purpose is to present Jesus as the Son of God, fully divine, and so he begins way back in eternity past: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But Mark's purpose in writing is to present us a portrait of Jesus as the Servant. He's writing about the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the first verse, he explains his intention:

- Jesus—His name
- Christ—His title
- Son of God—His lineage

The gospel begins with historical facts, but these facts are in need of explanation. Facts by themselves don't always constitute good news. Christ died and was buried, but so were millions of others. Christ rose from the dead, which isn't true of anyone else but only of Him. Paul explained it this way in:

1 Corinthians 15:3-4—“For I delivered to you what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Those are the facts, but these facts aren't 'good news' until you add the subsequent clauses. Christ died "for our sins," and Christ died "according to the Scriptures." That's why it is good news, because the facts all by themselves without the purpose behind them would be meaningless. The facts are to be understood in light of their fulfillment. God's Son has entered both time and

space and has accomplished our salvation. What was foreshadowed by symbols and foretold by the prophets has now been fulfilled by Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

That's why Mark locates the 'beginning of the gospel' with the ministry of John the Baptist who paved the way for the Lord Jesus. Mark begins with John because you cannot understand the good news of the gospel unless you first understand the need for it, the promise behind it, and the attitude required to receive it. I came across a fascinating quote this week:

Boris Pasternak — *“It is not revolutions and upheavals that clear the road to new and better days, but revelations, and the lavishness of someone’s soul, inspired and ablaze.”*

If ever there was a man who fit that description of a lavish soul inspired and set ablaze, it was John the Baptist. John was a prophet whose sole purpose was to prepare the way, clear the road for the coming of the Messiah. He was one of the greatest characters to ever walk across the stage of human history. You won't find John's name mentioned on the world's lists of 'who's who,' and he's probably not even mentioned on their lists of 'who's not.' In the gospels, no life received a higher compliment from Jesus than did the life of John the Baptist:

Matthew 11:11 — **“Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.”**

So for a few minutes this morning, I want us to consider John's life and what this first chapter of Mark has to say about him. First of all, we need to understand that:

1—John's ministry was a PREPARATION for the gospel (1:1-3)

“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.’”

As the forerunner of the Messiah, John was the herald who announced the King’s arrival. He spent his life preparing to introduce Jesus to the world. John was an odd character who lived in the wilderness, wore a camel hair coat, and lived on diet of locusts and wild honey. ‘Ordinary’ is not a word that we would use to describe him. He was a man sent from God who had come to talk about someone other than himself. And it was his sold-out devotion to God that prepared him for the divine task of introducing Jesus to the world. John’s ministry was all about Jesus.

Like a signpost that pointed others to the way of salvation, John the Baptist was a beacon that pointed others to Jesus Christ. In those days, when a king was coming through an area, he would have an entourage of people who preceded him to prepare the way. The king’s herald was responsible for clearing the road, for announcing to people far and wide that the king was coming, and removing any obstacles in the way. It is in this same sense that John’s ministry was preparation for the Lord’s coming. He is the King’s ‘herald.’

His ministry fulfilled Old Testament prophecy

Mark doesn’t give us any of the background details about John. He begins with John’s public ministry and explains the prophetic significance of it. To find out more about who he was, we can go to Luke’s account. Luke was interested in the humanity of those about whom he wrote. It is Luke who fills in the background of John’s story. According to Luke 1, John was born to a priest

named Zachariah and his wife Elizabeth who were both righteous before God. Both of them were known for their godly lives. They were godly people who had lived blamelessly before God and others, but they also knew disappointment in life. Luke 1:7 says they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. Throughout their years, they had desired to have children and prayed that God would allow them to conceive, but for whatever reason, the Lord had not allowed it. But God always works in His own time and in His own way. Well, Zachariah was performing his priestly duties in the temple one day when an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Such a sight caused him to be troubled and a sense of fear fell upon him:

Luke 1:13-17—“But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zachariah, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John...”

The angel gives Zachariah the remarkable news that a son would be born to he and Elizabeth. The angel goes on to mention several things that would be true about their son:

Luke 1:14-17—“...And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

How does Zachariah respond to such news? The Bible says that he responds with unbelief. For that reason, the angel says that he would be unable to speak until the day the child was born. And that is exactly what happens. Elizabeth conceives, gives birth to a son, and when the whole family wanted him to have the name of his father, Zechariah writes out on a tablet that the child's name will be John, and is finally able to speak again. And the Bible says that he is filled with the Spirit and prophesied, saying:

Luke 1:68-79—“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David, as He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember His holt covenant, the oath that He swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare His ways, to give knowledge of salvation to His people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Luke goes on to say that John grew and became strong in spirit, and was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel. But Mark doesn't include any of that biographical information about John. Instead, he mentions the prophecy. He shows us how John's ministry is linked to something that

Isaiah said would take place just before the Messiah arrived on the scene. In verse 3, Mark will quote from both Isaiah and Malachi:

Isaiah 40:3-5—“A voice cries in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Malachi 3:1—“Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to His temple.”

Malachi 4:5-6—“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse.”

And so John’s life and ministry is in direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. But then consider also how:

His ministry inaugurated New Testament hope

As the introducer of Christ, John is the divinely appointed doorway into understanding who Jesus is and what God is doing in him. That’s why Mark opens up with the Scripture (Isaiah and Malachi) and immediately shows that the arrival of Jesus is the fulfillment of a long-anticipated promise. He prepares the reader for the kind of Messiah that Jesus will be. His call for repentance, his baptism, and his ministry in the wilderness explains Jesus’ arrival in redemptive

terms rather than political ones. So before Mark shows us Jesus' power, he confronts us with humanity's need. The gospel will address sin in the heart before it will confront structures in Rome.

In many ways, John is a bridge between the Old and New Testaments. He is the last of the Old Testament prophets. And his purpose is to prepare the way for the Messiah who was to come. As such, he establishes the proper response to Jesus. John doesn't draw attention to himself. Instead, He points away from himself to "one mightier than I." His ministry models how people are meant to respond to Christ—with repentance, humility, and faith. A second thing:

2—John's preaching was an ARTICULATION of the gospel (1:4-8)

"John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

John's ministry was a preparation for the gospel, and his preaching was an articulation of the gospel. Mark points out four key aspects of John's ministry—it was foretold by the Old Testament prophets who spoke of it, he appeared in the wilderness, he heralded the coming of the Messiah, and he called upon people to repent and be baptized. We read in Matthew's account:

Matthew 3:1-2—"In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.'"

That's his message. In verse 14, Mark tells us that after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel." So

that when Jesus begins His ministry, He preaches the exact same thing that John the Baptist preached. I want you to notice how it was:

A message of repentance

Verse 4 says, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John’s entire ministry took place in the rugged Judean wilderness. Not in the lap of luxury, but in the deserts. William Hendrickson gives a graphic picture of what the wilderness was in those days. Listen to what he writes:

“John was preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, a term indicating the rolling badlands between the country of Judaea to the West and the Dead Sea, and the lower Jordan to the east, stretching northward about the point where the Jabbok flows into the Jordan. It is indeed a desolation, a vast expanse of barren soil covered with pebbles, broken stones and rocks. Here and there a bit of brushwood appears with snakes crawling underneath. It shimmers in the haze of the heat, the limestone rock is hot and blistering, and sounds hollow to the feet as if there was some vast furnace underneath. In the Old Testament, it is sometimes called Jeshimon which means ‘the devastation.’ It is evident from Isaiah and John’s preaching as recorded by Mark, that the wilderness through which a path must be made ready for the Lord is, in the final analysis, symbolizes the people’s hearts that were inclined to all evil.”

So that John, where he lived and preached, was actually living out a pictorial illustration of the message that he was preaching to prepare the way for the Lord to come to the hearts of men and women in Israel. It was a place that illustrated the barren wilderness of people’s hearts. And it was there in the wilderness that multitudes of people came from everywhere to hear John preach, and to be

baptized while confessing their sins. Now, don't get the impression that John was out there berating people in his preaching. No, he was confronting sin so that it could be dealt with. And he was particularly harsh with the religious leaders who simply came out to make a show of things. He confronted them in their hypocrisy. Matthew's account gives us an idea of his message:

Matthew 3:7-12—“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor and gather His wheat into the barn, but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

John's message emphasized the need for repentance, and then notice that it was also:

A message of remission

The repentance that John called for was illustrated through water baptism. There at the Jordan River, he immersed in water those who came to confess their sin and need for the salvation from God. One commentator refers to the fact of how John's baptism was a novel idea, for no one else had ever baptized like John. The only thing that was close was the fact that whenever Gentiles converted to

Judaism, they were ritually washed which signified a break with their past Gentile sinfulness. But here, Jews were now being asked themselves, God's chosen people, to be washed. Such a thing was unheard of.

John was pointing out that all need repentance—everyone, Jews and Gentiles. So he's preaching the forgiveness of sins and, as we'll see in a minute, the One who can provide it for us. But John is proclaiming the truth that repentance is necessary, and it's not a message of cheap grace or a cheap forgiveness. Sin must be confronted so that sin can be confessed, and when it is confessed, it will be cleansed.

1 John 1:9—“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Ray Stedman said that John the Baptist was like God's bulldozer. That's the image we get from Isaiah 40.

Ray Stedman—*“Repentance is the great leveler. It fills in the valleys and depressed places of our lives—the places where we beat ourselves down and torture ourselves with guilt—and lifts them up. It also brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on when we refuse to admit we are wrong. Repentance takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, and straightens them out. And it makes the rough places of our lives plain and smooth.”*

Isn't that a beautiful description of repentance? It is an about-face, turning in the opposite direction of which you are currently heading. It is turning from sin and self and turning to the Savior. And so John's message was one of repentance and remission, but then it was:

A message of redemption

John called upon people to confess their sin, to repent and be baptized, and to recognize their need for salvation that is by God's grace and received through faith. He pointed others to Christ and said:

John 1:29—“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

John's ministry was a preparation for the gospel, John's preaching was an articulation of the gospel, and then we notice a final thing:

3—John's lifestyle was an ILLUSTRATION of the gospel (1:6-8)

“Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, ‘After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”

John lived what he preached, and preached what he lived. He wasn't a walking contradiction like so many are, those whose lives don't line up with their lips. A professing Christian who says 'Jesus is Lord,' but whose life is functionally ruled by career, comfort, or cultural approval. They talk about trusting Christ, yet every major decision is driven by self-interest. They may affirm biblical convictions at church, but quietly abandon them when they become costly at work, online, or in relationships. When obedience threatens income, reputation, or convenience, obedience loses. Their lips confess Christ, their priorities crown something else.

But not John the Baptist! He was a lamp that pointed men and women to Christ, in terms of both his lips as well as his lifestyle.

His appearance

Verse 6 says that John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. Now, why do you think Mark includes the details of John's dress and diet? The answer lies in the fact that it was intended to get the attention of others who would have associated him with the prophet Elijah. His separated lifestyle was one of simplicity and a life free from distraction.

Matthew 11:7-10—“As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: ‘What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king’s houses. When then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’”

Jesus said that if they were willing to accept it, John had been the ‘Elijah’ who was to come. That is, John assumed the manner and lifestyle of the prophet Elijah who'd called the people of his day to national repentance. His manner of living was a rebuke against the godlessness and self-serving materialism that had become commonplace. And it illustrated a call to separate oneself from the sinful ways of the world, to repent, and return to a life centered on God.

His attitude

Notice what Mark says about John's motive in verses 7-8, “After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.” In other words, there is One coming after me who so much greater

than I am that I'm unworthy to untie His shoes. It speaks of John's humility and the honest assessment he had of himself.

John 1:19-23—“And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’ And they asked him, ‘What then? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ And he answered, ‘No.’ So they said to him, ‘Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?’ He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John's attitude is such that he says, “I'm a lamp, but I'm not the Light.” John pointed other people to Jesus. That was the driving passion of his life. When other people thought that he was the guy, John responded, “No, I'm just a simple messenger. The voice of one crying out in the wilderness. I'm a simple lamp. But the One coming after me, He's the Light!” Don't mistake the lamp for the light. John's entire ministry was to magnify Christ. And when his crowds were getting smaller while Jesus' crowds were getting bigger, it interesting that there wasn't the slightest hint of jealousy or competition or insecurity in him. He lived by an important philosophy:

John 3:30—“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Man is such a strange creature that when you pat him on the back, all the swelling goes to his head. John never suffered from any of that. The aim of ministry was not self-exalting. He held himself in proper estimation.

John says in verse 8, “I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” He is saying that he could point people to God, but he could

not lead them into a daily experience of life in the Spirit. Only Jesus Christ can immerse believers into the Spirit of God. Jesus came to impart eternal life. Salvation is possessing Christ's life. It's a participation, not an imitation. A Christian is someone in whom the life of Christ has permanently come to indwell through the person of His Spirit. To be saved is to possess eternal life. And it is received as a gift to the one who turns away from their sin, who recognizes the depth of their need for God's grace, and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation.

And so perhaps a fitting question to leave you with is this one—"Have you repented of your sins?" You've stopped defending yourself, stopped blaming everyone else for your failures, stopped offering excuses. Repentance says to the Lord, "I have no one else to blame, the sin is all mine, the guilt is all mine, and I believe that only the Lamb of God can take it away." Friend, that's the place where God will meet you. He will wash away your guilt, remove the stains of sin, He will cleanse and forgive you, and He will make you brand new. That's why the gospel is such good news.

John pointed others to Jesus. May the same be said of us, and may John's philosophy be our own:

John 3:30—He must increase, but I must decrease."