

On Your Mark, Get Set, Go!

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Mark 1:1-8

Let's turn our attention to our text for this morning. Mark, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following words:

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,'" 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. 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." Mark 1:1-8

Brothers and sisters, the grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8).

WHO IS MARK?

His full name was John Mark. He was a Jewish Christian. He was the Cousin of Barnabas (cf. Colossians 4:10). His mother, Mary, owned a home in Jerusalem where the nucleus of the original Christian community met. This was the home Peter came to after his miraculous release from prison (cf. Acts 12:12). After Paul and Barnabas returned from Jerusalem on their first missionary journey, they added John mark to their party (cf. Acts 12:25). Because Peter refers to Mark as "my son" in 1 Peter 5:13, it's probable that Mark was a convert of Peter's ministry. Some scholars, though I wouldn't be dogmatic here, believe that Mark is the rich young man that is written about in Mark 14:51-52.

WHERE DOES MARK'S WRITING FIT?

Mark is one of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Synoptic comes from two Greek words which mean to "see together". They are called synoptic gospels because of the similarity of their content and layout. Many Bible Scholars believe that Mark's gospel is a record of Peter's reports of the ministry of Christ. Justin Martyr (100-165) referred to Mark's gospel as the "Memoirs of Peter." Furthermore, the majority of New Testament scholars hold what we would refer to as Markan

priority. This is the studied assumption that Mark was the first of the gospels to be written. The argument is pretty expansive and pretty technical, but it would appear, as you read and study the synoptic gospels, that Matthew and Luke probably had a copy of Mark's gospel when they wrote their respective books.

The emphasis of Mark's gospel is not as much the identity of Jesus, or even the words of Jesus, but rather the activity of Jesus. Mark records Jesus' activity as He busily moves from place to place and meets the physical and spiritual needs of people. Mark's gospel presents us with a Savior on the move!

TO WHOM WAS MARK WRITING?

Mark is writing to Romans Gentiles. It's possible that he even wrote the gospel of Mark in Rome to the Romans (the believers there). It's interesting to note that Mark omits a number of things that would not have been meaningful or would have had little context in the minds of his Gentile audience. For instance, we don't find a comprehensive genealogy of Christ like we do in Matthew. There are fewer quotations from the Old Testament. There is less of an emphasis on fulfilled prophecy. References to the Law, which was given to Israel, are sparse. References to Jewish customs are omitted. A study of the original language reveals that Mark interpreted Aramaic words and used a number of Latin terms in place of their Greek equivalence.

WHAT IS MARK'S MAIN MESSAGE?

To present Jesus as the Servant of God! The key verse: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" Mark 10:45. The first half of the book, which ends at 8:30 highlights Jesus' serving; and the second half, which begins at 8:31, emphasizes Jesus sacrificing or giving Himself. A good theme for the book might be: The Sacrificing Savior. The gospel of Mark is a fast-paced narrative. It depicts a resolute, determined Savior on the move. 36x in the book, 42x in the Greek, we find the word "immediately". Why immediately? Mark is describing a Servant busy obeying His Father and meeting the needs of people. The Romans were people of action, thus Mark portrays Jesus as a man of action. Put on your running shoes because Mark moves fast!

Dead center of the book, Mark 8:27, Jesus asks a pivotal question. He looks at His disciples and asks, "Who do people say that I am?" This is the line in the sand question that we each must answer. Who is Jesus? Is He just a great man, teacher, prophet in a historical lineup of other great men, teachers, and prophets, or is He God in the flesh? Your answer puts you on the side of belief or unbelief!

C.S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, said, "I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a

lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”

I. A NEW BEGINNING (v.1)

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark’s opening line, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” is actually the title of the book. The word “beginning” has biblical overtones which lend an awesome ring to the opening phrase. It serves to recall that it is God who initiates redemption on behalf of men. God had eternally decreed to save men from before the foundation of the world. As a matter of fact, John tells us that Jesus was the Lamb who was slain from before the foundation of the world (cf. Revelation 13:8). Before the universe was created, before time existed, before man was created, God knew that we would fall to sin. He knew we would rebel against our Creator. And in His wisdom and love, in eternity past, God planned for His Son to step into history to provide the ultimate sacrifice - the sinless Son of God would suffer sin’s penalty of death, be raised from the dead, thus providing a way of salvation. God has been sovereignly superintending history - every person, every place, every action - setting the stage for the grand entrance of redemption’s main character, Jesus Christ. Mark is saying, “This is it. This is the moment that God’s eternal plan has been anticipating. The Redeemer is here. The Second Adam, has come and He will introduce a whole new situation for the world. For Mark, the introduction of Jesus is no less momentous than the creation of the world, for in Jesus a new creation is a hand.¹

What is the great subject of Mark’s writing? Thankfully, he tells us! Mark’s theme is the theme of themes, the gospel. “Gospel” is the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον from which comes our English word “evangel”. It means a message of good news. In the Old Testament as well as in Greek literature it was often used of reports of victory from the battlefield. Thus, Mark opens his book, “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” What is this good news? The Angels, at the birth of Christ, announced to shepherds in the field, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you *good news* of great joy that will be for all the people” Luke 2:10. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news that our sins can be forgiven, that we can belong to the family of God and that upon life’s final breath or the triumphant return of Christ, the redeemed will go to heaven where they will spend eternity in the presence of the Lord. The gospel is the announcement of Jesus’ victory over sin, death, and hell (cf. Galatians 1:1-9) For Mark, the gospel was much more than a set of truths or beliefs. The gospel was a person. Notice, this gospel is about “Jesus Christ, the Son of God”.

¹ James R. Edwards, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2002), 23.

“Jesus” His divinely given personal name. It’s the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew יהושע (“Joshua”), which means, “Jehovah saves.” The Angel of the Lord told Joseph, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” Matthew 1:21. This is name associated with Jesus’ **humanity**.

“Christ,” on the other hand, is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title מָשִׁיחַ (“Messiah, Anointed One”). It was used specifically of the Deliverer anticipated in the Jewish world who would be God’s Agent in fulfilling Old Testament prophecies. This is name associated with Jesus’ **divine** nature. Though the title “Christ” became part of Jesus’ personal name in early Christian usage, Mark intended it to be understood that this Jesus, of whom he writes, is indeed the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus was the eternal and anointed of Jehovah sent to provide redemption. In these two names, “Jesus Christ,” we see the Eternal Anointed One revealed as the human Jesus for the salvation for the lost. This is good news.

The title “Son of God” points to Jesus’ **unique** relationship to God. He is a Man (Jesus) and God’s divine “Special Agent” (Messiah). As the Son, He depends on and obeys God the Father (cf. Hebrews 5:8).

II. AN OLD PROMISE (v.2-3)

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,’”

PREPARING THE WAY FOR THE SERVANT KING

In ancient times, before a king would visit any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. By calling the nation of Israel to repentance, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Mark begins his account by quoting from 2 Old Testament prophets:

Malachi spoke of *God’s messenger*. Malachi wrote, “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; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts” Malachi 3:1. Malachi’s prophecy originally points to Elijah as the preparer of the way. There was widespread expectation in Judaism that Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire (cf. 2 Kings 2:11), would return as the forerunner of the Messiah. But Mark identifies John the Baptist as being the fulfiller of Elijah’s earlier climactic role.

Isaiah spoke of *God’s message*. Isaiah wrote, “A voice cries: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” Isaiah 40:3. The message is, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.”

It's interesting to note that three times in verses 2-3 Mark uses the word "way" or "path". He is connecting the gospel of Jesus Christ to the *Way*. We see this language appear in Acts 9:2 as Saul went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the *Way*, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Likewise, Jesus declared of Himself, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" John 14:6. From its outset, the story of Jesus directs hearers not to some sort of spiritual feelings or mysticism, not to a set of ethical rules and systems, but to something practical and transforming – a *Way* of salvation made possible by God through Jesus Christ.

III. THE CONTENT OF THE MESSAGE (v.4-5)

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.

Mark writes that John appeared in the wilderness. The wilderness where John ministered was the rugged wasteland along the western shore of the Dead Sea. If you think back about the wilderness in Israel's history, it was a place that represented repentance, and hence God's grace. In the exodus from Egypt, God led Israel through the waters of the Red Sea. God's intention was to lead Israel into the Promised Land, but prior to entry they became convinced they could not oust the current inhabitants of the land, even though God told them they could. Because of their lack of belief in God's Word and promises, He cursed them with forty years of wilderness wandering until the unbelieving generation died off. But those wilderness years were ultimately a place of repentance and thus a place of God's grace. In this sense, John's appearance in the wilderness fulfills the Mosaic prototype. It's a sort of reenactment of the mighty inaugural even of Israel's history in the Exodus.²

Can you see what's taking place here? A new exodus, a new beginning, a fresh start is coming with the arrival of Jesus Christ. Mark opens his gospel in the wilderness where the story of Israel all began, calling them back out into the wilderness to go back through the waters of the Jordan to start the story over again. But don't just view this as a second chance. We don't need a second chance. We'll make as much of a mess of our second and third and fourth and fifth chance as we did of our first chance. That's not what we need. That's not good news. And that's not what Jesus comes to give us. Jesus came not to give a second chance, but an entirely new beginning.³

² James R. Edwards, 29.

³ David Strain, *A Voice in the Wilderness – Mark 1:1-8*, April 29, 2018.

BAPTISM OF REPENTANCE

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance...

The word repentance is the Greek word *μετάνοια*. It means, “a change of mind that results in a change of action.” To repent means to be going in one direction and then turning around and going in a new direction. We must always proclaim repentance in our gospel presentations. Too often we present Jesus as an add-on to our lives and as a result we have more *fans* of Jesus than we do true *followers* of Jesus. Far too many pastors are proclaiming a watered-down Christianity with no demands and no discipleship. Paul tells us, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths” 2 Timothy 4:3-4. We need ministers of the gospel who will, with grace, tell the truth about sin and righteousness and judgment so that people will repent, experience remission of sins, and be ready for the return of Christ.

It’s critically important to note that John didn’t baptize people to make them right with God. The phrase “proclaiming a baptism of repentance” does not mean that people were being baptized to have their sins forgiven. They were being baptized because their sins had been forgiven. They went to John and were plunged into the Jordan River to declare publically that their lives had been changed by the power of God. They were baptized to give glory to and identify with the God who had forgiven their sins and given them new life.

Question: How do you know if you have repented of your sin? Two things: First your life is characterized by ongoing repentance and second, your life begins to bear the fruit of new life (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17).

FORGIVENESS OF SINS

John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The word “forgiveness” in verse 4 means to be released or delivered from captivity. It means to have your sins remitted as if they had never happened. Acts 3:19 places repentance and forgiveness together. Luke writes, “Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out (washed over or wiped out).”

Where are the preachers who are preaching about repentance? There are plenty of preachers who speak eloquently about forgiveness, but do so excluding a clear call to repentance. Friends, there is no forgiveness apart from repentance. Far too many preachers are busy stroking people’s egos and building their own religious empires. People need to know that the only way to Heaven is through the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. People need to know that sin kills. People need to

know that there is a real Hell to shun and a real Heaven to gain. Pray for the men who still carry the mail for the glory of God in pulpits around the world! And commit to be a mail carrier yourself!

REVIVAL

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.

The verb tense in verse 5 paints a moving picture. The people literally “kept coming out” as if in a steady stream to be baptized. Likewise, they kept on confessing their sins. This was no idle mass movement of curiosity seekers. They had come because they had been changed!

IV. THE CHARACTER OF THE MESSENGER (v.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.”

A. JOHN WAS A HERALD

The word preached is the Greek word κηρύσσω. It means to “preach,” “proclaim,” or “herald” a message. It was used of a king’s messenger who went throughout the realm proclaiming the message of the king. He was to be listened to and obeyed as if the king himself were delivering the message. John came in the authority of the king, declaring the message of the king, and was to be obeyed as if the king had come in person. In this sense, John was like a flashlight – pointing to Jesus.

B. JOHN WAS HUMBLE AND SELF-FORGETTING

It’s interesting to note that Jesus called John the Baptist the greatest of the prophets (cf. Matthew 11:1-15). Again in Luke 7:28, Jesus said of John, “I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” John says of John the Baptist, “He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light” John 1:7-8.

John didn’t think of himself as second; he thought of himself as the littlest, the least and the last...and that’s what made him great. John was careful to magnify Jesus and not himself. He must become greater, I must become less (John 3:30). John didn't even see himself as being worthy to untie Jesus’ sandals. In that culture, the taking off of sandals was a job for the lowest slave. Hebrew slaves weren’t even allowed to do it. Roads were covered in dust and dirt and

often flowed with raw sewage, thus making feet filthy. John is saying that he is lower than the lowest servant, not worthy to do even what they do. In essence, John is saying, "I am nothing; but He is everything." Listen. You will never see the worthiness of Jesus unless you first see your unworthiness!

Most students are aware of Isaac Newton's famed encounter with a falling apple. Newton discovered and introduced the laws of gravity in the 1600s, which revolutionized astronomical studies. But few know that if it weren't for Edmund Halley, the world might never have learned from Newton. It was Halley who challenged Newton to think through his original notions. Halley corrected Newton's mathematical errors and prepared geometrical figures to support his discoveries. Halley coaxed the hesitant Newton to write his great work, *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*. Halley edited and supervised the publication, and actually financed its printing even though Newton was wealthier and easily could have afforded the printing costs. Historians call it one of the most selfless examples in the annals of science. Newton began almost immediately to reap the rewards of prominence; Halley received little credit. He did use the principles to predict the orbit and return of the comet that would later bear his name, but only after his death did he receive any acclaim. And because the comet only returns every seventy-six years, the notice is rather infrequent. Halley remained a devoted scientist who didn't care who received the credit as long as the cause was being advanced.⁴

CLOSING BENEDICTION

As we bring our corporate worship to a close this morning, hear this benediction from Luke in Acts 3:19-20, "Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord..." And all God's people said, "Amen!" Go in peace!

⁴ C. S. Kirkendall, Jr., *Source unknown*.