

*Where we start . . .*

Why is it that people say that “a picture is worth a thousand words”? What do they mean by that?

How do you go about gleaning the “message” out of a picture?

*What we read . . .*

As we move further into Mark’s opening section of his Gospel, we get a few simple “snapshots.” Let’s look at these pictures by reading Mark 1:9-15.

How does Jesus’ baptism by John compare and contrast with what the crowds were doing? (Look at both 1:5 and 1:9.)

When Jesus came up out of the water, a number of things happened—each small snapshot conveying something about Jesus and His about-to-be-inaugurated ministry. What do you see in . . .

The rending of the heavens?

The descent of the Spirit?

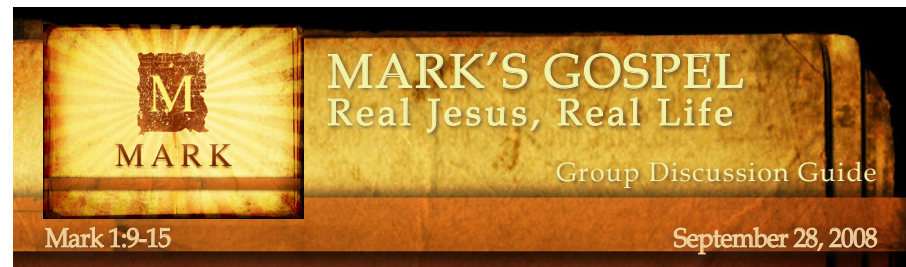
The voice from God?

After the baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness. Why did He go?

Given what happened in the wilderness, what could you conclude about Jesus’ ministry as the “Coming One”?

*Why this matters . . .*

For us to relate well to Jesus it will be of great help for us to understand what He is “all about.” So, drawing on what we’ve been looking at, what can you fill in in your picture of Jesus? What is Mark telling you about Him?



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*Diving in . . .*

As Mark’s story unfolds, he introduces us to Jesus. And in that introduction, he tells us some very significant things. It’s not that he tells us everything we either want or need to know about Jesus, but he tells us what we must understand to grasp what he longs for us to see . . . what fits with his story.

Mark is not making stuff up about Jesus, but he is being selective (under the inspiration of the Spirit!) and what he tells his readers. And we will get the most out of what Mark tells us by paying attention to what Mark writes and by resisting the tendency to read either what we already know about Jesus into the passage or read what the other Gospel writers tell us into Mark. Let’s listen well to what Mark has to say about “the Coming One.”

*Discussing . . .*

As we get into Mark, one of the characteristics of his style that you will begin to see is that he tells his account of the life of Jesus in a series of simple and short “snapshots.” That analogy works fairly well to capture Mark’s style. He gives us descriptive pictures of events. He often leaves us a bit short on explanation. He doesn’t provide the lengthier discourses of Jesus found in the other Gospels. So, we have to pay close attention to what he shows us for us to understand what he wants us to get.

Because of that, the opening questions (in the *Where we start . . .* section of the discussion guide) will be helpful in introducing Mark’s style. Think “pictures” and discuss how pictures can communicate. That will help set the stage for thinking through Mark’s pictures.

In Mark 1:9-15, we actually have a number of very small snapshots; perhaps imagine it like a collage of small photos going into making a larger image. Mark is going to show us Jesus’ baptism, but he spends only a few words on each facet of the collage.

After you’ve read the whole section, the first question really has to address what the relationship is between Jesus’ baptism and the baptism of the crowds that were coming to John. If you compare Mark 1:5 with Mark 1:9, you will see that there are some clear parallels. In the language that Mark wrote, the parallels are even clearer because of the similarity of word order (that is not always preserved in English translations). The chart below reflects this:

	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Who</i>	<i>What</i>	<i>Where</i>
<i>Mark 1:5</i>	They went out	All the people	To be baptized	In the Jordan
<i>Mark 1:9</i>	He came out	Jesus	To be baptized	In the Jordan

Comparing the two, perhaps the most notable difference is that the crowd *came confessing their sins*; Jesus did not. Jesus participates (as did the crowd) in John’s ministry of preparation; but not for the same reason (because of His own sin).

Coming up out of the water, Jesus’ experience immediately after the baptism is remarkable. Three different components go in to helping us see Jesus for who He is.

The “tearing open” of the heavens must have been a wonderful sight. Something “in the heavens” was happening! How are we to understand this? Both the image and the language of “rending the heavens” might well have precedent in Isaiah 63:15-64:1. The nation of Israel was under oppression and under the weight of their sin. And in that setting, a cry arose. “God, tear open the heavens and come down and rescue us!” The image of the heavens opening would clearly convey the idea of God stepping into our world in a decisive and fresh way. And this is consistent with John the Baptist’s ministry as described earlier: he is preparing the way of God to show up in a fresh and new way.

The Spirit, Mark says, descended “like a dove.” The language could be understood that *something* that had the *appearance* of a dove was there. But then, this Spirit-in-dove-like-form descended “into” Jesus. (That is what Mark’s words mean; it’s a bit more startling than the common English rendering of the Spirit descending “upon” Jesus.) Somehow, Jesus comes to be marked, in a decisive way, by the Spirit of God. And this is consistent with John the Baptist’s prior declaration: the “Coming One” would pour out the Spirit on the people of God.

Lastly, God speaks. We are given no real explanation of what the declaration was intended to clarify; we are only told the words that were spoken. We do tend to read our fully-developed theology into these words, drawing on what we think we already know about Jesus. But when Mark’s readers first read these words, they might not have gotten as far as we do in understanding what the voice of God declared. Minimally, God’s pronouncement must mean that Jesus is uniquely identified with God and that God is very pleased to have it so!

So we have a man who steps through the doorway of preparation to be marked by the breaking in of God into the world, identified with the very Spirit of God, and affirmed as being uniquely related to God. What would you think would be the first thing such a one should do? Well, Mark tells us what happened next.

Notice Mark’s language; the Spirit “drove” Jesus into the wilderness. It’s a strong word; it means to compel or to thrust out. The Spirit intended Jesus to go into the wilderness. And, doubtless, the Spirit of God knew what Jesus would encounter there. What are we to make of this additional snapshot? Well, minimally, this opening page of Jesus’ ministry helps set the stage for what will follow. Whatever else Jesus will be about, it seemingly will include confrontation with the demonic, the powers opposed to what God is doing.

Well, where does this series of short snapshots leave us? Mark is clearly helping us see certain things about Jesus. And we need to pull together what we’ve seen and draw some reasonable conclusions. Why does this matter? Why should we do this? Because we will relate to Jesus on the basis of what we think He is “all about.” So, to best relate to Him, it will be good to see Him rightly.

From this opening chapter of Mark, what can we conclude? You and your group will come up with your own words to describe what you see in the snapshots. Things like “unique representative of God,” “the one through whom God breaks into the world,” “the Spirit-empowered Spirit Giver,” “the Coming One who will engage in spiritual battle through the Spirit’s power.” All these ideas and more are packed into Mark’s opening verses. And reflecting on just who this Jesus is and what He is going to do (as it unfolds in Mark’s Gospel and in our lives) is essential. We want to see *Him*.