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Modern culture loves action. It seems almost everything we watch, drive, wear, drink, eat, and do must promise or deliver some kind of action. Marketing gurus promise action-packed drama, action-filled entertainment, the latest in active sportswear, and equipment that promises a rewarding workout. “Just do it!” is a slogan readily identified with a brand of sportswear. Our love of action fills football stadiums and ice hockey arenas, where the price of a ticket, the cost to park, and refreshments can easily zap a fan’s wallet to the tune of two hundred dollars—or more. Some action-loving football fans shell out thousands of dollars to attend a Super Bowl. What is especially frustrating during a game is to leave your seat to visit a concession stand, return several minutes later, only to hear a friend say, “You missed the action! Our team scored two touchdowns while you were gone.”

It would be a shame to miss any part of the gospel of Mark, because it delivers action that impacts life and eternity. Mark’s inspired narrative offers the good news of Jesus (Mark 1:1) to the whole world, but it was directed primarily toward the action-loving Romans. They could see Jesus in action and be attracted to Him.

CAMEOS OF JESUS IN ACTION

Unlike the gospel of Luke, Mark contains only a few parables, but its chapters are chock-full of cameos of Jesus in action. Early in the gospel, we find John the Baptist preparing Israel for its
Messiah, who suddenly comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Our next view of Jesus shows Him calling four fishermen to follow Him. From that point—in the synagogue, in a house, in open fields—we read about Him healing, changing lives, feeding a multitude, silencing a raging storm, giving mobility to a paralyzed man, expelling demons, enabling a deaf mute to hear and speak, and granting sight to a blind man. We see the active Messiah take three disciples up a high mountain and give them a glimpse of His dazzling glory. Immediately (this word occurs often in the action-packed gospel of Mark) after leaving the mountain, we read about Jesus healing a demon-possessed boy.

CAMEOS OF JESUS’ TRIUMPHAL ENTRY, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION

The action doesn’t slow as we approach the end of Mark’s gospel. We see Jesus setting a vigorous pace as He leads His disciples toward Jerusalem, where crowds welcome Him. He gathers His disciples together and paints graphic pictures of end-time events. Later, He engages in earnest prayer in Gethsemane. His subsequent arrest, betrayal, and crucifixion come at us in quick succession, but the agony of seeing Jesus mocked, beaten, and nailed to a cross fills our hearts with grief. We shed tears as we see Him die.

But Jesus triumphs over death. He voluntarily assumed an active role in the crucifixion by choosing to die for us, and He assumed an active role in defeating death by rising from the grave.

We serve a living Savior. He is actively interceding for us in heaven and actively empowering us for a life of holiness and service. May our study of Mark’s gospel help us to be all He wants us to be!
Although greatly outnumbered by Persian soldiers on the plains of Marathon in Greece, the Athenian army defeated the Persians. The victorious army dispatched Phidippides, a runner, to carry the good news of the victory to Athens, twenty-six miles away. Phidippides covered the distance in about three hours and delivered the good news. He died shortly thereafter from exhaustion.

Good news about Jesus, who offers forgiveness and new life, is worth delivering, even if doing so carries a heavy personal cost. This study portrays John the Baptist as an exemplary messenger of this good news, and it motivates us to proclaim the good news as well.

COMMENTARY

The gospel of Mark reads like an eyewitness account of Jesus—the eyewitness long thought to be the apostle Peter. Many scholars think Mark’s author, John Mark, served as the personal secretary of the apostle Peter, recording with precision the details of Jesus’ life as remembered by the apostle. Thus, Mark is known as “Peter’s gospel.”

While Mark is the shortest of the Gospels, it is the most active, perhaps revealing the impulsive disposition of Peter. The word immediately appears over forty times. The book contains only one long teaching discourse (ch. 13) and four parables, but eighteen miracles are cited.
John Mark wrote during the time of Roman peace (pax romana) in the world, but simultaneously with the persecution of Nero, the Roman emperor. The content of the book, which often explains Jewish words and customs, indicates it was written to non-Jewish readers. Several Latin words are used, and the time of events is reported in Roman time. As our study progresses in Mark, notice the vivid eyewitness details of events and actions found in the book.

The Long-Expected Good News of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1–8)

Mark spent little time laying the groundwork for the ministry actions of Jesus. While Matthew and Luke begin with genealogies, Mark’s brief prologue points directly to Jesus Christ, the Son of God (v. 1)—the One whom the prophet John the Baptist declared as more powerful than I . . . whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie (v. 7).

John Mark emphasized that the arrival of Jesus was expected and broadly announced. The gospel or good news about Jesus Christ had been declared long ago by both Malachi (Mal. 3:1) and Isaiah the prophet (Isa. 40:3). Malachi was written in the fifth century B.C. and Isaiah in the eighth. Almost a thousand years later, John the Baptist announced the fulfillment of these prophecies.

Mark’s prologue would have been easily understood by non-Jewish readers. It was typical for the Romans to send a herald ahead of prominent officials to announce their coming. Heralds often brought the good news of a royal birth, which indicated the beginning of a new age for the empire. John, the messenger ahead of Jesus, announced the coming of both the person of Jesus Christ and the kingdom He would initiate (Mark 1:2).

John prepared the way and made straight paths for the coming of the Son of God (vv. 2–3). Cyril of Jerusalem noted that John’s message was the crown of the prophetic tradition and the firstfruits of the gospel. His preaching—a baptism of repentance for the
forgiveness of sins (v. 4)—signaled the core of the salvation message found in the person of Jesus Christ.

Water baptism was common in the first century for those who converted to Judaism, but John infused new meaning into the rite—baptism as a sign of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (v. 4). John required confession and repentance prior to baptism even for the children of Abraham. Repentance means not merely being sorry for sin, but literally hating it to the extent that the repentant turns away from a sinful life to a new life in Christ. John taught confession and repentance as necessary for forgiveness and genuine pardon.

The people of the Judean countryside responded to John’s message and came to him for baptism (v. 5). Certainly John was not the draw, for he was clothed not in a business suit, but in the rough animal skin of camel’s hair and wearing a leather belt. He was a mountain man of sorts whose diet consisted of locusts and wild honey (v. 6).

WORDS FROM WESLEY

Mark 1:7–8

A true forerunner of his Lord
Will point to Him that comes behind,
  Worthy to be of all adored
The God, the Saviour of mankind!
The servant strives with jealous care
Himself out of our minds to’ efface,
  His image from our hearts to tear
And print his Maker’s in the place.
  A preacher of repentance true
  Impatient of esteem and praise,
Withdraws himself from human view,
  And sends us to the God of grace;
Skilful to turn our heart and eyes
On Him that doth our hearts require,
  Doth with the Holy Ghost baptize,
And purge our earth with heavenly fire. (PW, vol. 5, 445)
But John’s message was powerful and full of optimism. He announced the coming of the age of the long-expected kingdom of heaven with the Messiah who would bring salvation. This powerful man who would follow would not merely baptize with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (v. 8). Indeed John’s message was good news—better than any herald had previously announced.

The Good News of Jesus Christ Is Confirmed (Mark 1:9–13)

The good news of Jesus Christ is not without other witnesses. Its reality is confirmed not only by the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, but by the confirmation of God himself, and Satan, the enemy of all good.

John the Baptist must have been surprised the day Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan (v. 9). Scripture records that John was apprehensive (see Matt. 3:13–15) but eventually consented. At the moment Jesus was coming up out of the water, the presence of God invaded history in a way never seen before or since (Mark 1:10). The heavens were torn open (something only the God of heaven could do), and Jesus saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice said, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (vv. 10–11). This account not only confirms the deity of Jesus Christ as God’s Son, but records the presence of the triune God.

The debate over Jesus Christ as God and human would command the attention of the church for its first three centuries. Those present at Jesus’ baptism, while undoubtedly awestruck with amazement, were witnesses of the Trinity at work. All three entities of God were present—God the Father speaking from heaven, God the Holy Spirit appearing as a dove, and God the Son accepting the blessing of the heavenly Father. Notice here that God in three persons is recognizable; He is not merely changing from one personality to another. The triune God, present from before
creation and continuing into the infinite future, in that moment of human history, was readily recognizable.

But the confirmation of Jesus as God’s Son did not come solely from God. Satan himself weighed in on the matter. Scripture vividly records Jesus sent by the Spirit . . . out into the desert, where he was tempted by Satan for a period of forty days (vv. 12–13; see also Matt. 4; Luke 4). From these passages, we understand that Satan recognized the severe challenge the coming of Christ would be to his authority. Here, before Jesus even began His divinely appointed task, Satan worked to dissuade Jesus from His mission. This incident is more than symbolic, but demonstrates Satan as a real being, working to overthrow the authority of heaven. While his days of prominence are numbered (see Rev. 20), his present arts of deception are not to be taken lightly or ignored.

God’s Son was not abandoned during those forty days in the desert, but angels attended him (Mark 1:13). Through reliance upon the strength of the heavenly Father, He was able to overcome temptation and refrain from falling into the Tempter’s grasp. The human Jesus endured Satan’s most heinous devices, yet overcame. In the same way, men and women today can overcome temptation through the strength of the same heavenly Father. Victory over temptation is not by our own power, but with the strength of God that lies within us (1 Cor. 10:13).

Temptation is not sin, but when we give in to it, it becomes sin. Gregory the Great, in the sixth century, wrote, “The dynamic of temptation proceeds first by suggestion, then by taking delight in the suggestion, then by consent.” God through the Holy Spirit enables us to curb and dismiss the power of temptation at its early stages. Our delight in temptation only leads toward the sin that can entrap.

The good news of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, confirmed both by God and Satan, should cause us great encouragement when we face temptation. “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,
let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Heb. 4:14–16).

The Good News of Jesus Christ Calls for Action (Mark 1:14–20)

Jesus knew the time had come. His message—“The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (v. 15)—built upon and fulfilled the message (v. 4) the now-imprisoned John had preached (v. 14). The time indicated here is not a particular hour, but the opportune or seasonable time much like a parent would say to his or her child, “It is time you learned to drive.” Jesus’ message proclaimed not only repentance and belief in the good news, but the coming of the kingdom of God (v. 15).

WORDS FROM WESLEY

Mark 1:15

In the children of God, repentance and faith exactly answer each other. By repentance we feel the sin remaining in our hearts, and cleaving to our words and actions: By faith, we receive the power of God in Christ, purifying our hearts, and cleansing our hands. By repentance, we are still sensible that we deserve punishment for all our tempers, and words, and actions: By faith, we are conscious that our Advocate with the Father is continually pleading for us, and thereby continually turning aside all condemnation and punishment from us. By repentance we have an abiding conviction that there is no help in us: By faith, we receive not only mercy, “but grace to help in” every “time of need.” Repentance disclaims the very possibility of any other help: Faith accepts all the help we stand in need of, from Him that hath all power in heaven and earth. Repentance says, “Without him I can do nothing;” Faith says, “I can do all things through Christ strengthening me.” (WJW, vol. 5, 168)
To assist in the proclamation of the good news, Jesus began recruiting followers. He did not simply conscript persons with time on their hands, but busy people with energy and full-time occupations. Today’s leader knows, “If you want something done, ask a busy person.” Jesus himself used this strategy as He recruited His disciples.

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee (v. 16), He saw men plying their fishing trade, something one can still see along Galilee. Fishing was a major industry in Galilee. Josephus, a first-century governor of Galilee, recorded 330 fishing boats. These men were not fishing alone. One group was accompanied by their father Zebedee and hired men (v. 20). Yet Jesus seemed intent to pick certain ones from the groups of fishermen and called, “I will make you fishers of men” (v. 17). At once and without delay the fisherman left their work and followed him (vv. 18, 20). Why would one leave his livelihood and follow a stranger, unless he somehow knew the stranger offered a much fuller life?

WORDS FROM WESLEY

Mark 1:17–18

See that you “wait upon the Lord without distraction:” Let nothing move you from your centre. “One thing is needful;” to see, love, follow Christ, in every thought, word, and work. (WJW, vol. 14, 462)

Much could be said about Jesus’ call to His early disciples. He must have spoken with authority, as He called for complete obedience. There was something divinely compelling about His call. It is reasonable to think that Simon, Andrew, James, and John had heard the message of Jesus, and perhaps even been baptized earlier by John the Baptist or Jesus himself. In following Jesus, these men would learn that discipleship is ultimate obedience to the Savior.
Our response to Christ’s call is often riddled with excuses: It takes too much time; I can’t commit; I’m enjoying life; and so on. Yet these disciples simply obeyed. “It is preposterous from the world’s point of view that those without education could be used to instruct the nations” (Eusebius); yet through twelve obedient disciples, the good news of Jesus Christ has resulted in the salvation of millions of men, women, and children throughout the centuries.

Note the rapidity of movement present in the first twenty verses of Mark’s gospel. The writing of John Mark moves us quickly into the story line of Jesus’ ministry, demonstrates action speaking as loudly as words, and provides the further context for the action of the chapters that follow.
DISCUSSION
If you received good news that many people had been waiting to hear for a long time, wouldn’t you share it enthusiastically? John the Baptist proclaimed the long-anticipated good news of Jesus unreservedly.

1. Why do you agree or disagree that it is significant that Mark’s gospel is just “the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1)?

2. What do you learn from John’s example about genuine humility?

3. How did John’s ministry prepare the way for Jesus? Do you think people today need to repent and be baptized in order to receive forgiveness? Why or why not? If you disagree, explain how people today can receive forgiveness.

4. Read Mark 1:9–11. Why do you think Jesus was baptized?

5. Do you agree or disagree that although Jesus was tempted He could not have sinned?

6. Compare Mark 1:12–13 and Matthew 4:1. What role did the Spirit play in Jesus’ temptation? How do you explain this role?

7. According to Mark 1:16–20, four fishermen immediately answered Jesus’ call to follow Him. What cost was involved in their decision? What might it cost believers today to follow Jesus? Is following Him worth the cost? Explain.

PRAYER
Lord, thank You for raising people like John the Baptist to prepare people’s hearts to meet You. Give us the courage to step into that role as the Holy Spirit leads us today.
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