

Mark: The Beginning of the Gospel

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The original title of the Gospel of Mark was based on the first phrase "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark used no commas so we don't know if he was using Christ as a proper name or a description, but for our purposes the two titles give us a description of who Jesus is, and Mark's book will develop these two titles. Jesus is the anointed one of God sent into the world to atone for our sins, and Jesus is God in the flesh who alone could make a perfect sacrifice of infinite value.

Mark tells us in 1:2-3 that Jesus came in fulfillment of prophecy written by Isaiah who promised that the messenger, John the Baptist, would "make ready the way of the Lord". John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness similar to the prophet Elijah's appearance and ministry inviting people to be baptized in accordance to the repentance of sin in order to be prepared for the Messiah. Mark actually quotes from three Old Testament Scriptures in Isaiah, Exodus, and Malachi. By quoting these three scriptures, Mark certifies that the Torah, the Major Prophets, and the Minor Prophets all confirm his story about Jesus. John's baptism was unique at the time because the local synagogues baptized only proselytes and those who were previously defiled (like cured lepers). By calling all of Israel out to be baptized he was implying that all Israel was defiled.

John's message is given in verse 7-8 by announcing the coming of someone "mighty", and much greater than John. This is interesting if you compare what Jesus said about John in Matthew 11:11, "there has not arisen anyone greater than John the Baptist". Jesus was saying that among mortal men John was the greatest, but John said that compared to Jesus he was not worthy to untie his sandals (as a common servant would do). Comparing the work of John and Jesus, John's work prepared hearts, but Jesus actually changed hearts. Those who came to John were seeking, but Jesus would actually give them what they need for eternal life.

The Unique Baptism

After He was about 30 years old, Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John the Baptist. Since Jesus alone needed no repentance, John tried to prevent it in Matthew's account, but Jesus insisted because this was to be His introduction to the world. Jesus had lived in eternity in heaven as God, was born of humble circumstances, and now after 30 years He would be introduced by John in front of a crowd of repentant sinners. John identified Him as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn.1:29), and then God the Father in heaven identified Jesus as His Son by speaking, "Thou art My Son, in thee I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11). The crowd then saw the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus. The Kingdom of God did not come with sirens blaring or bombs bursting, but in an obscure place in front of confessing sinners, while Jesus was introduced by an unlikely non-establishment character who was like Elijah. Perhaps our clearest picture of the Trinity was here at the baptism of Jesus where we see Jesus in the flesh, see the Holy Spirit descend upon Him, and then hear the voice of God the Father in heaven--all at the same time. As soon as the Spirit came upon Jesus, He immediately led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted.

The Temptation of Christ

In order for Jesus to fully experience in His flesh the full impact of human temptations, and to prove that He was indeed sinless, the Spirit actually "impelled" Him to go out for forty days to be tempted by Satan. It is shocking that the Holy Spirit actually delivered Jesus into the hands of Satan for this clash in the wilderness. The appearance of the Son of God on a fallen planet earth was a direct confrontation with Satan in Satan's realm. In this confrontation, we the audience get confirmed experiential proof that Jesus was sinless. Jesus felt the hunger, the pain, the thirst, and the fear of death, yet as God He was perfectly able to withstand the temptation.

Preaching the Gospel in Galilee and Calling the Disciples

The work of John the Baptist was completed, and as he had said, "I must decrease and He must increase". In the providence of God, John the Baptist was arrested by Herod, and the rest of Mark's story will be about Jesus' ministry. In Mark 1:14-20, he wrote a short synopsis of Christ's initial preaching in Galilee, and His call to His closest disciples to follow Him on a full time, total commitment basis. Jesus' message was the gospel or "good news" that in Him the kingdom of God had come. The essence of the kingdom is that God fully rules our life. Without Christ, this was not possible on planet earth because of sin that is in us and in the fallen world we live in. In order for the relationship of God and human beings to be reconciled, God had to come into the world in the flesh (the incarnation of Christ), and on our part we have to repent and believe (Mark 1:15). These two commands to us to repent and believe should be taken together. To repent is to turn away or change your mind from an existing object of trust, and then believe in (commit yourself whole heartedly) to a new object of faith. Therefore, Jesus was saying to turn away from your current belief system of materialism, humanism, or structured religion; and instead believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In this sense, the Kingdom of God is "already but not yet". It has already come in the person of Christ, but it is still future when God's rule will be openly established on earth.

In Mark 1:16-20, we have the author's account of Christ's effective call to what would be the inner core group of His disciples that would follow Him and participate on a full time basis. Mark wrote in a "bottom line" minimal details way so we have to consult the Gospel of John and the gospel of Luke for the full story. Simon Peter and Andrew had been at the baptism of Christ as described in John 1:35-43, and had believed He was the Messiah. Nevertheless, they went home to continue in their fishing business with their partners James and John, sons of Zebedee. Now, a few months later, Jesus came to them where they were fishing, did a miraculous catch of fish for them, and called them to drop everything and follow Him. Before, they had believed He was the Messiah, but after the miraculous catch of fish detailed in Luke 5:1-11, they more fully realized the deity of Christ and the commitment involved in "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." The application to us today is that to follow Jesus is to turn away from your old life and commit yourself to Jesus. They would change from fishermen to fishers of men. Like the disciples we are not to be defined any longer by just what we do for a living; but now in Christ we are ambassadors who will bring a compelling message to others that will change their lives. The promise of Jesus to make us fishers of men involves at least three things: 1. We will become something new, 2. Jesus will cause it to happen, and 3. It requires a decision and a commitment.

Teaching in Capernaum—Mark 1:21-39

As you read Mark's account, you can't help but notice how busy and active a day in the life of Jesus was. Mark's account is full of "immediately" and "just then". This day in Capernaum was a whirlwind of activity. On the Sabbath, Jesus taught in the synagogue, and the people were amazed because His teaching was far different from their usual teachers who quoted others and gave opinions. Jesus was teaching "with authority", and Jesus spoke for God and as God instead of just about God. Jesus coupled His teaching with mighty deeds that only God can do as He exercised His authority over both illness and demons. It is surprising to me that the demon possessed guy in v.23 was in the synagogue because if they had known, he would not have been allowed in. There was a surprising amount of demonic activity during Jesus' ministry. My opinion is that they are normally hiding under the radar, and avoid public scrutiny, but the ministry of Christ was that unique event that required Satan to marshal all his forces to oppose the Son of God who had entered the fallen world, which is currently the domain of Satan. The evil spirits confronted Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them and proved His authority over them by driving them away. Naturally the people witnessing those confrontations were amazed, and began asking a recurring question which continued to be asked throughout Mark---Who is this guy? Who is this guy who teaches with such authority, and also exercises power over unclean spirits and illnesses as well?

Jesus immediately went to Simon Peter's house and cured Simon's mother-in-law of an illness. The news of these events travelled so quickly that by evening a huge crowd had gathered at Simon's house to be healed. Most religious leaders would be happy about these huge crowds, but Jesus saw them as a hindrance in some sense, and at this point He began trying to find some solitude, move to other towns, and He began commanding others not to tell about the miracles. We can see this clearly in 1:44 when Jesus told the healed leper to tell no one. Naturally we are curious as to why Jesus would tell demons not to reveal who He is, and tell those healed of illnesses not to tell. I can think of several reasons why Jesus may have done this. First, Jesus wanted freedom of movement, and the pressing crowds

were hindering Him. Second, Jesus wanted no money or fame for healing. Jesus did not trust a faith built on miracles. Thirdly, He knew the people were looking for a political/military Messiah who would lead a revolt, and He had no intention of doing that. Fourth, Jesus knew their hearts, and like the crowd in John 2:23-25 and Jn.6:15, He knew they weren't truly repentant. The truth of who Jesus is and what we must believe can only be known by the cross and the resurrection, therefore He rejected the fame and publicity He got from just healing.

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