

## ***THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL***

**Mark 1:1-8**

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*Authority* and *suffering* are words that we often do not use to describe the life of one individual. They appear to be oxymoronic. We think of those in authority as being secure and safe. Kings and queens live in spatial palaces surrounded by soldiers and presidents live in the White House surrounded by Secret Service agents. Those granted authority are given the task of protecting not only themselves, but entire nations from suffering. And while most of those in authority are supposed to be public servants, that often is not the case.

However, these social constructs are leveled in the gospel of Mark where Mark sets forth Jesus Christ as both divinely authoritative and as a suffering servant. The gospel of Mark was written as an encouragement to Roman Christians under siege by the wicked emperor Nero. It contains much of the preaching of Peter, with whom Mark was closely associated in Rome. Some think that Peter himself encouraged Mark to write these things down so that the teaching of the apostle's might last long after the apostles were gone.

The book is neatly divided into two sections. Chapters 1-8 place Jesus in Galilee and emphasize the *authority of Christ* as the Son of God. He calls and commissions His disciples, He rebukes the scribes and Pharisees, He identifies His spiritual family, He preaches in parables, He demonstrates His power over nature and the physically and spiritually infirmed, He performs other miracles such as the feeding of the five thousand and walking on water. All of this demonstrates His authority and this first section culminates in Peter's confession, "You are the Christ" (8:29).

Chapters 9-16 focus on Christ as *the suffering servant*. Leaving Galilee, Jesus sets His face resolutely towards the events in Jerusalem. In Mark 10:45 we find the centerpiece of this section, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." These chapters serve to place Christ in the redemptive historical perspective of Isaiah 53, where the prophet tells of the suffering servant in very descriptive language. Jesus Christ fulfilled this prophecy in its fullness.

### **I. The Person of the Gospel (1:1)**

Mark's gospel begins with what is really the title of his gospel, "**The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**" It is not the gospel of Mark. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ according to Mark. This serves to tell us much about the direction that Mark will go in his writing, which I remind you was inspired by God and is the inerrant and infallible Word of God.

"**Beginning**" could designate the beginning of the book or the starting point. However, this would be apparent to the reader of the book by being the first line on the first page. No, for Mark, "**beginning**" hearkens back to Genesis 1:1 where we are told of the acts of God's creation. The gospel of Mark tells us of a new "**beginning,**" Jesus' act of creation, a new creation, a new heavens and a new earth. The Old Testament began with the first Adam in paradise and ended in the wilderness. The New Testament begins with the second Adam in the wilderness and ends in paradise. So Mark immediately sets out to identify Jesus with the Old Testament. All of the Old Testament has pointed to this "**beginning**" in redemptive history.

Mark further clarifies this "**beginning.**" This is the beginning of "**the gospel.**" Again, not the beginning to the book itself, which is one of four canonical gospels that give four different perspectives of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, but the beginning of "the good news." The word translated "**gospel**" is from the Greek *euangelion*. The Romans, to whom Mark wrote this

book, would have been familiar with the term as it was used to denote the “good news” of reports from victory from the battlefield. The term was also used to describe the birthday of the emperor or the day he rose to power. But in the New Testament, *euangelion* is always in the singular and always has the definite article. It is not *a* good news that might be duplicated or repeated at some point, but *the* good news of salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

Mark reinforces this in showing that this gospel is “**the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**” The gospel is of a person. As one writer put it, “In Mark’s understanding, therefore, the gospel is more that a set of truths, or even a set of beliefs. It is a *person*, ‘the gospel of Jesus Christ’” [James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 25]. It is not that the teachings of Jesus are not important. It is not that doctrine is not essential to knowing Christ. But it is more than that. That is why we see Mark’s emphasis in the book on the actions of Christ more so than the teachings of Christ. We will often see that Mark simply says, “He taught them” without telling us what it is that Jesus taught. He does not give detail on the long discourses of Jesus as the other gospel writers do, who wrote to different audiences with a different focus. He focuses on Jesus’ actions, in His putting feet to His words.

Mark is very specific in designating who this person is that is the subject of the gospel. It is “**Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**” “**Jesus**” is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Joshua,” which means “God is salvation.” It is the name revealed by the angel before Jesus is born, “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21).

“**Christ**” means “the anointed One.” It is the Hebrew equivalent of “Messiah.” It is this title that Peter gives to Jesus in his confession in 8:29, “You are the Christ”, which serves as the apex of the first section of the book. Peter’s confession was not with a total understanding of Jesus as the Christ as is evidenced by his future actions. However, in fairness to Peter, the magnitude of Jesus as Messiah could not be fully known until the sufferings of the Cross, which is the emphasis in the second section of Mark. The title assumes that Jesus is the Christ, the chosen one of God, anointed by Him to deliver His people from their sins.

“**Jesus Christ**” thus serves to show the humanity of Christ. But Mark does not stop there. He adds, “**the Son of God.**” This designates Jesus’ peculiar relation to God. His authority and power are derived from God, who is His Father. The title emphasizes the deity of Christ, which fueled the ire of the religious elite of Jesus’ day.

But these names not only describe the person of Christ, but His work as well. He is “**Jesus**” (salvation); He is “**Christ**” (the chosen deliverer); He is “**Son of God**” (the authoritative Son whose will was to do the will of the Father). Thus we see Mark setting forth both the person and the work of Christ as the content of the gospel. It is in this Christ alone that salvation has been accomplished and in Him alone the people of God are rescued from the wrath of God and delivered from the bondage of sin.

## **II. The Preparer of the Gospel (1:2-8)**

This “**gospel**” is not isolated from the Old Testament, which, as we have seen, points to this time in redemptive history. “**As it is written**” is the standard formula used in the New Testament to introduce a quotation from the Old Testament. “**As**” marks the fulfillment of the prophecy that had been announced.

### **1. The prophecy of a preparer (vv. 2-4a, 6)**

The history of redemption is accomplished in God’s time in God’s way. The Old Testament prophets prophesied not only of the person of the gospel, but the forerunner of the gospel as well.

Mark turns his attention from Christ to that forerunner. He does so by tying the forerunner to the Old Testament prophecy itself. **“As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; <sup>3</sup> THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, ‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT’”**” (vv. 2-3).

This is really a combination of two prophecies. Verse 2 is from the prophet Malachi, who had spoken these words 400 years earlier (Mal. 3:1). It was the last time that the people had heard from God. The prophecy told of a messenger that would prepare the way of the Messiah. In Bible times, this would be a person that would go ahead of a dignitary and remove any impediments on the road along the way. Rocks would be tossed aside and holes would be filled. Malachi prophesied of the one who would do this spiritually, the one who would prepare the hearts of a people for the arrival of the Messiah. Imagine the people’s excitement in hearing with great anticipation that God was speaking again! God, who had been silent, but not inactive, for those 400 years. Surely those years were a time of spiritual apprehension and barrenness. Now, Mark introduces these words that would be familiar to his reader because they contained the content of what they had last heard from God. Could it be that the preparer was coming? Could it be that Messiah was at hand?

In verse 3, Mark further identifies the messenger. Quoting Isaiah 40:3, Mark says the forerunner would be **“THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS.”** The wilderness in Scripture is always seen as the place of God’s preparing His people for deliverance to a homeland after years of captivity. The content of the message of the crier is clear, **“MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.”** All four of the gospel writers quote this text, Matthew, Mark and Luke verbatim. The preparation for the Messiah was to be heralded by the messenger, but the action itself was to be by the people. They are commanded to **“make ready the way of the Lord”** by heeding the message of the messenger. How this is accomplished we will see in a moment.

Mark then gives the fulfillment of the prophesy in v. 4, **“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness.”** John was the promised one, the cousin of Jesus. As one writer put it, “Without so much as a conjunction following the quotation, John the Baptizer appears... The immediacy of John’s introduction identifies him as the messenger of preparation for Jesus” [Edwards, 29]. Luke gives us the fullest account of this John and his mission.

**Luke 1:11-17** – And an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> Zacharias was troubled when he saw *the angel*, and fear gripped him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your petition has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will give him the name John. <sup>14</sup> “You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. <sup>15</sup> “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother’s womb. <sup>16</sup> “And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> “It is he who will go *as a forerunner* before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, **TO TURN THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS BACK TO THE CHILDREN**, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

The angel attests that John would be the forerunner “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” Mark has him appearing in the wilderness, like Elijah. Mark has him proclaiming the same message that Elijah proclaimed. He comes dressed in the garb of Elijah, **“John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey”** (v. 6; see 2 Kgs. 1:8). John’s diet and appearance clearly associate him with Elijah.

However, just in case this Jewish audience missed it, John identifies himself with this voice in the wilderness. In John 1:23, “He said, ‘I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, “MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,” as Isaiah the prophet said.’” With this pronouncement, the anticipation of the people was confirmed. God was speaking to His people again! The forerunner had arrived which meant that the Messiah was close at hand!

John’s appearance in the wilderness was no accident. It tied him to the prophet Elijah, who was also a wilderness prophet (1 Kgs. 17:2-3). You no doubt remember that Elijah did not die a normal death but was taken up in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs. 2:11). Because of this, there was widespread belief in Judaism that Elijah would be the one to return as the forerunner. But tragically, just as some were mistaken about the identity of the forerunner, some were, and remain, mistaken about the Messiah.

## 2. The message of the preparer (vv. 4b, 7-8)

John came preaching. The voice of crying was a way of preparation for the Jesus Christ, the Son of God. What was John’s message? How were the people to prepare themselves for the arrival of Messiah? Mark says that John came “**preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.**” There are three significant things we see in John’s message.

First, he preached “**baptism.**” Baptism was not new to the Jew. They were accustomed to baptizing proselytes, that is, Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. This baptism symbolized cleansing and purification from their heathen beliefs and the embracing of Jehovah as their God. This washing was a ceremonial act of necessity in the Jewish tradition.

What John did was totally different. He did not baptize Gentile converts, but Jews. This was a radical change for the Jew. What was once meant only for the heathen was now required for the chosen people of God. What John was preaching, then, was that in effect the Jew needed to undergo a change just as the pagan Gentile. Their place in history as the children of Abraham made no difference. They too needed to be converted.

The way of conversion constitutes the second part of John’s message. He preached a baptism “**of repentance.**” The rite of baptism itself was not enough. There must be repentance. John does not teach that baptism causes repentance. “**Baptism of repentance**” means that the baptism, the rite, the ceremony followed repentance as a necessary consequence. “Repent,” according to the etymology of the word, means “to change one’s mind.” But in the New Testament, beginning with John the Baptist, “**repentance**” means a decisive and deliberate turning away from sin.

Lest we miss the magnitude of this, we need to again consider Mark’s Jewish audience. He was calling them to repent, therefore signifying their sinfulness. Further, upon repentance, they were to come into the wilderness, the place of God’s judgment and the place of His deliverance, to the Jordan River to be baptized, which was an outward expression of their repentance.

The third part of John’s proclamation shows the result of true repentance, “**the forgiveness of sins.**” “**Forgiveness**” means remission or a sending away or dismissal. It speaks of the cancellation of sin without demanding the deserved punishment. In this we see two theological truths concerning “**forgiveness of sins**” that are fulfilled only through the sacrifice of Christ at the Cross and the resulting justification of those who trust in Him. The first is *expiation*, which means the removal of sin.

**Psalm 103:12** – As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

**Isaiah 44:22** – I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud.

This removal of sin is made possible only by the shed blood of Christ. John wrote, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29).

The second truth we see concerning “**forgiveness of sins**” is *propitiation*, God’s wrath being satisfied, the penalty for sin being paid.

**Ephesians 1:7** – In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace

**Colossians 1:13-14** For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, <sup>14</sup> in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Many people today continue to live in the bondage of sin because they do not understand these truths about the “**forgiveness of sin.**” They fail to recognize that if they have truly trusted Christ and Christ alone as Lord and Savior, then at the Cross, their sins were put on Christ. Their sins are covered by His shed blood so that when God looks at them, He sees them through His blood as righteous, just as though they never sinned. The believer is freed from both the guilt and the penalty of sin. God’s righteous wrath is fully satisfied in Christ alone.

Which leads us to the primary thing that John preached in verses 7-8. He preached Christ and not himself. Everything that John did was to prepare the way for Christ. His baptism, his preaching, his calling all pointed to Jesus. Everything that John did would be made greater in Christ. John testifies of this in v. 7, “**And he was preaching, and saying, ‘After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.’**” Notice John’s humility, who here proclaims that he is not even worthy to be the servant of Christ. It was this same John who said, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). Everything pointed to Christ, including his ministry.

John concludes with a promise, “**I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.**” John was speaking to those he had already baptized and testifies that the baptism of Jesus is greater because it is of the Holy Spirit. This baptism of the Spirit by Christ could not be accomplished until the work of redemption at the Cross was completed, after Jesus’ death, burial, resurrection and ascension. We know that this was visibly accomplished on the day of Pentecost, where the work of the Holy Spirit took on a different form. No longer would the Holy Spirit work only from without, but in this baptism of the Holy Spirit by Christ the Spirit takes up residence in the believer, indwelling him so that he is now “the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God” (1 Cor. 6:19).

## Conclusion

### 1. God is faithful to His promises.

### 2. Baptism is for believers only.

This is a one of the fundamental tenets for Baptists. Baptism of believers only is a requisite for those that hold to regenerate church membership, which means that the true church is made up only of those who are regenerate, converted, and desire to follow the Lord in obedience to His commands. This does not mean that the church on this earth is pure, but holiness is its goal. This was the case in the first 300 years of church history and began to change only when Augustine professed a church on this earth that was mixed, consisting of believers and unbelievers alike. Even though Augustine’s belief was based on a wrong interpretation of the church in the parable of the wheat and tares, many followed Augustine’s lead in this matter, including the most recognizable names of the Reformation. It was not until the Anabaptists

stress on baptism of believers alone, which marked the church as distinct from the world, that this tenet of the Baptist faith was formalized.

**3. The impact of John's message (v. 5)**

**“And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.”**

**4. Have you heard and responded to John's message?**