

THE PLACE TO BEGIN

by Ray C. Stedman

I have just spent two weeks in Mexico with the Wycliffe Bible Translators, and I have realized anew that the Gospel of Mark is the most translated book in all the world. No other book appears in as many languages. Almost all Wycliffe translators, after they have reduced a language to writing, begin their translation of the Scriptures with this gospel. I am sure that the fact it is the shortest of the gospels has something to do with that decision! Bible translators are human beings like the rest of us, and no one wants to start with a gospel as long as Matthew or Luke. But it is also a fact that Mark is particularly suitable for introducing to the Scriptures people of all backgrounds, classes, and tribes. It is the one gospel of the four which is aimed at the Gentile ear.

No one can read the Gospel of Matthew without seeing that it is written for the Jew. It has to do with the Old Testament, and with Jewish customs. But Mark was written for the Roman world, for the Gentile, for those who do not know the background of the Old Testament. Therefore it is a very instructive and helpful gospel to use in the initial approach.

Many scholars think that the Gospel of Mark is the very earliest New Testament Scripture we have. It was probably written sometime in the sixties of the first century, which would make it very early, going back to the beginnings of the Christian story. Scholars differ, however, as to whether Matthew or Mark wrote first, because it is hard to tell who borrowed from whom -- Matthew from Mark, or Mark from Matthew. Certainly we know that Luke borrowed from both Matthew and Mark. It is true that Mark's gospel is reproduced entirely in Matthew and Luke, except for a few verses. So somebody had to borrow from somebody else -- had to have someone else's account before him -- as he wrote.

We do know that this gospel was written by a young man named John Mark, who appears several times in our Scriptures. His mother was named Mary, and was a rather wealthy woman who had a big house in Jerusalem. In the twelfth chapter of Acts we are told that the early disciples held a large church prayer meeting in her house for Peter when he was put in prison. We know that young John Mark was taken by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, traveling with them to the island of Cyprus. But, for some reason -- we are never told quite why -- Mark refused to go with them when they went on into the mainland of what today is Turkey. Instead he went back home to his mother's house. Paul was upset about that, and evidently felt that Mark was a quitter. When it came time for them to go out again, although Barnabas wanted to bring Mark, Paul would not let him come. So they separated. Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus and Paul and Silas went back to the areas where they had gone before. Then Mark drops out of sight for a time.

The next we hear of him, he is an associate of the Apostle Peter, who speaks very affectionately of this young man -- calls him "Mark, my son" in his first letter {cf, 1 Pet 5:13}. Early church tradition tells us that Mark became the companion of Peter. Eusebius, a church father writing in the third century, says that the early Christians were so entranced with all the things Peter told them that they asked Mark to write them down. Perhaps that is how we got The Gospel According to Mark, for it reflects much of Peter's memories and experiences with Jesus.

This much about the origin of the Gospel of Mark can be verified from Scripture. But there is another aspect of it which perhaps I ought to call "Stedman's speculation", because it is not inspired, but is something which long has intrigued me: I pass it along for you to make of it what you will. In Chapter 14, Verse 51, reference is made to an incident which only Mark records. In his account of Jesus' betrayal and arrest. Mark tells us that as he was being led away by the soldiers, a young man followed him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. Apparently thinking he was a disciple of Jesus who had been foolish enough to remain behind while all the others had run for their lives, the soldiers attempted to seize him. But all they got was the cloth as he ran naked into the night. Many scholars have suggested that this was Mark, for he would have been a "young man" at that time. Perhaps, because of his fascination with Jesus, he had been hanging around, hoping to learn more, had gotten into this trap unknowingly, and had to flee for his life, leaving his garment behind. The fact

that Mark is the only one who mentions this incident is highly suggestive that this indeed was Mark himself.

But there is another story, in Mark 10, found in Matthew and Luke as well, which has fascinated me -- the story of the rich young ruler. Here we have a young man who, toward the end of Jesus' ministry, came to him with a question. He was a wealthy young man of the ruling class, evidently a handsome, very warm person. He ran up and knelt at Jesus' feet, and said, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" {Mark 10:17b RSV}. Jesus Said, "Have you kept the commandments?" The young man said he had kept them from his youth. Then Mark records something that neither of the other accounts tell us. He says, "And Jesus looking upon him loved him," {Mark 10:21a RSV}. That little personal note suggests to me that Mark was that rich young ruler.

So perhaps that little story of the young man who ran away without his robe is Mark's way of telling us that the rich young ruler who went from Jesus so sorrowfully -- as the account tells us, because he had great possessions -- did not remain sad, that later on, having thought things over, he made the commitment Jesus required of him: he gave away all that he had. He gave up his inheritance, and all he had left was a robe -- and he lost even that, finally, and he came and followed Jesus. I do not say that the Scriptures tell us explicitly this is what happened -- but I think it is! So, if you do not mind the "Stedmaniac" version, this gives us a little added insight into The Gospel According to Mark.

At any rate, if something like that happened, it would account for Mark's seeming fascination with two qualities of Jesus which he gives to us in the very first words of this gospel: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," {Mark 1:1}. Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, the human Jesus -- but also the Son of God -- the Divine One. Mark seems to be very fascinated by that combination: the Ruler who manifests his ability to serve, and the Servant who knows how to rule.

That, by the way, is how the book is organized.

Mark is very easy to outline, because the author gives us certain natural divisions, as we will see as we go along. It falls readily into two halves.

- The first, Chapter 1 through Chapter 8, Verse 26, is The Servant Who Rules -- the authority of the servant.
- The second, from Chapter 8, Verse 27 through to the end, is The Ruler Who Serves.

Let's read the opening verses:

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 thy face,
who shall prepare thy way;
the voice of one crying in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight -- "**

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. {Mark 1:1-5 RSV}

That is an amazing statement Mark makes. His emphasis right from the outset in this gospel -- which he calls "the beginning of the gospel," the place to begin -- is the ministry of John the baptist. And the highlight of that ministry was the fantastic success John enjoyed way out in the wilderness. About this time last year I was in that wilderness. We drove from the city of Jerusalem down to Jericho, then up the valley of the Jordan River. I noted that this is indeed a wilderness. It is a dreary, desolate, forsaken, lonely spot -- even today. The Jordan flows through here, but it is the only water for miles around. It is a parched and dreary place, rimmed by

desert mountains, barren and sere and dry.

Yet the people of Jerusalem and Judea left their cities, left their recreations and pleasures, and trekked through this howling wilderness to listen to a man preach. They probably had to walk twenty or thirty miles to hear John, but did so willingly and in such increasing degree that Mark here records, in only slight exaggeration, that "all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem" came out to hear him.

Most of us conceive of John as a rugged, fearless individual who preached thundering judgment and torment and condemnation to everybody. But if that were the kind of message John preached, nobody would have left Jerusalem to hear it. Nobody is interested in going to hear somebody excoriate them, strip and lash and flay them. Anybody who preaches like that does not have much of a following for long. And John did not preach like that, either. Mark tells us that his message was the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Something drew these people out of all these cities and brought them down into this desert area. It was to listen to this strange and rugged young preacher proclaim good news to them.

It is evident that John spoke to a universal need in their lives. We do not have to guess what it was, because it is still around. It is exactly the same need that grips people's hearts today. They were victims of a syndrome that every human being suffers from today -- just as they did then. The syndrome consists of three elements: sin, guilt, and fear. Those always go together.

What is sin? Well, basically and fundamentally, sin is self-centeredness, that's all. We commit sins because we are thinking of ourselves, loving ourselves, indulging ourselves, looking out for ourselves, taking care that no one get ahead of us. That is the essence of sin -- self-centeredness. We are all victims of it. There is not one of us who does not struggle in this area. We find ourselves trapped in it constantly. That is the curse which hangs over our whole human race. We were made by God to be vessels to convey his outgoing love, to reach out with it to everyone around us. Somehow that has become twisted, so that now -- instead of reaching out -- we reach in, and we love ourselves first.

And sin always produces guilt. Guilt is dislike of ourselves. We do not like the fact that we hurt others -- and we know we do. We feel responsible because we see the damage we do in other people's lives by our self-centeredness, and we feel guilty about it. We learn to hate ourselves to a considerable degree. That is why psychologists say that the great problem humanity wrestles with is self-hatred. Carl Menninger wrote a book, *Man Against Himself*, in which he documents that this is what we do. We hate ourselves. We do not like ourselves. We lose our self-respect. That is guilt.

Guilt is always accompanied by fear, because fear is self-distrust. Fear is feeling unable to handle life anymore, being aware that there are forces and powers we are unable to control, and which eventually are going to confront us. We are not able to handle them, and so we run from them. Even in the Garden of Eden, as soon as Adam and Eve sinned they felt guilty, and they hid in fear. It has been the history of the race ever since. Fear looms up, that uncertainty about the future, and we become fearful, timid people, afraid of what will happen next. We are walking on eggs all the time, afraid of being accepted or rejected, afraid of what people will do to us -- and especially, finally, afraid of what God is going to do to us. That is an inner torment the like of which there is no equal.

One of the places I saw in Mexico City was the Shrine of Guadeloupe. According to legend, the Virgin Mary appeared to an Indian back in the sixteenth century and healed him. Subsequently the site has become a healing shrine to which people come from all of Mexico. There are rooms stacked with crutches, left behind by people who have thrown them away, feeling they had been healed at the shrine. Some of them may have been. But any day you go there you can see people walking on their knees, crawling for blocks over dirty, rough pavement to get to that shrine. It is painful. They leave bloodstains on the pavement as they crawl along. Why would they do such a thing? Because the outward torture of bloody, lacerated knees is not half so hard to bear as their inner torment of guilt and fear. Someone has told them this will relieve that inner torment, and this is why they do it.

If we think that is superstitious nonsense, we need to look at some of the means we employ to free ourselves of guilt and fear. There is philanthropy, for instance. Some people try to give their money away. I know many

people who have benefited from guilty consciences, as wealthy individuals have tried to satisfy that inner sense of guilt and fear by giving money to some cause or other. Then there are those who turn into rigid moralists, who think of themselves as practically perfect, while looking down on those (everybody else) who do not measure up to the standard they have set for themselves -- which they do not measure up to either. But that is a way of paying for the guilt inside -- a way widely evident in evangelical circles, incidentally.

This is what drove all these people out of Jerusalem.

Here, suddenly, appeared a strange man who announced something. That is all he did. He never told how it worked, or why; he just announced it. But somehow the word got back to Jerusalem that it was working, that people were finding relief. The city began to stir, as word spread around from mouth to mouth, until finally the people began to stream out into this desert place and find John the baptist, listen to what he had to say, and be baptized by him. An amazing phenomenon, is it not?

Now, what was it that he announced, which drew people like that? This is what Mark settles on next. He says there are four things which are part of the ministry of John:

- One, it was anticipated in the Old Testament. The prophets spoke of it.
- Two, John appeared in a wilderness, according to that promise.
- Three, he announced the way to God. And,
- Four, he assured people that it was true by the symbol of baptism.

We will look at those individually.

First, this anticipation in the Old Testament: Mark quotes the prophets -- two of them, though he names only one. "Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way," is from Malachi {cf, Mal 3:1a}, the last book of the Old Testament. Mark does not mention him, and some scholars have gotten all upset about this, for they think that Mark was mistaken, and ascribed to Isaiah something written by Malachi. You can read hundreds of pages of argument on this. But Mark was not mistaken, or ignorant, or anything else; he simply wanted to stress what Isaiah said, because what Malachi said agrees with it. So he simply combines the two and begins with a word from Malachi, "Behold, I, (God), send my messenger before thy (Messiah's) face, who shall prepare thy way..." Then Isaiah comes in, "...the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight -- " And, in accordance with that, Mark says, "John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

Why would God have anticipated this truth so strongly? It is clear that God knew that a step of preparation had to be made in the hearts of men before God and man could come together. God does not just suddenly appear before men and expect man to receive him. He would only frighten him to death. Some preparation had to be made. So John was sent as that preparer, to go before the Lord and prepare the way for him -- by means of repentance, which we will examine in a moment.

Why was it predetermined that John was to begin his ministry in the wilderness? If he had been listening to the public relations men of that day, he would never have begun in the wilderness, of all places. That is certainly no place to start a ministry with which you expect to reach the whole populace. But God seldom listens to PR men -- or they to him -- and so John began his ministry in the wilderness, the worst possible place. But it worked!

God chose the wilderness because it is a symbol, a very apt symbol. It is symbolic of where John's message was to fall upon the wilderness of mankind. The desert is a picture of us, of our dry, empty, barren, weary, bored, and distraught lives.

The other day I was reading an article on the breakup of the marriage of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, who had been heralded for so long as the ideal couple. But then we got the inside story of what was going on.

Do you know what broke up their marriage? Sheer, utter boredom. They were just bored -- bored with each other, bored with their lives -- having everything they ever wanted, but not wanting what they had.

A Christian friend told me about a neighbor he had known for a long time, a very intelligent man who made a lot of money and had everything he wanted. But he came over one day, sat down at my friend's kitchen table, buried his face in his hands, and said, "God! but I'm bored!" Two weeks later he took his own life.

That is the desert, that is where people live. And that is why John appeared there. It is God's symbol to us of the hope that will spring up, even in the midst of the desert of our experience.

Then John announced this great word: that repentance is the way man comes to God, and that the result is the forgiveness of sins. The greatest blessing a person can experience is to have his sins forgiven. This is what these people were looking for, and this is what they found as they streamed out of Jerusalem to listen to John. They found forgiveness of sins, and it came by way of repentance.

Forgiveness needs to be understood. It is always in two movements. Somehow we have grown up with the idea that you forgive people only when they come and apologize to you. If you can get the person who has done something wrong to admit it and apologize to you, then you forgive him. That is absolutely wrong! Very few acts of reconciliation would ever take place on that basis. No, forgiveness has to start before the offender comes to you.

That is the glory of the story of the prodigal son, is it not? He came back from the far country, having wasted his father's goods and his own life, broken and humbled and ready to make himself his father's servant. But the moment his father spied him, his arms were open. And before that boy could say a word he was in his father's arms, being kissed and hugged while the fatted calf was prepared. Forgiveness starts in the heart of the one offended. He finds a basis on which, for some reason valid to him, he is ready to forget the hurt, to absorb it all himself and forget it. Because that is what forgiveness means -- forgetting it, not holding it over the person's head and bringing it up every now and then, but forgetting it, treating the person as if it had never happened.

The basis on which God does that is the cross of Jesus Christ. It renders him free to do so because it protects and maintains his justice. But the basis upon which we are exhorted to forgive is that we ourselves have already been forgiven. That is why Jesus told the story of the man who had been forgiven a tremendous debt, but who then grabbed by the throat a man who owed him ten dollars, and said, "Pay me what you owe me!" {cf, Matt 18:28b}. Jesus says that is what we are like when we do not forgive those who offend us. We have been forgiven a tremendous debt, and on that basis we are to forgive others. So that is where it starts -- in a change of attitude in the heart of the one who has been offended.

But it can never be successful or complete until there has been a change of attitude in the heart of the offender. That is, it must be accepted by the one who has given the offense. He has to acknowledge that it was an offense, has to acknowledge the guilt. That is what is called "repentance." You must change your mind, stop justifying it, admit that it was hurtful, and then the pardon can be received, forgiveness can be applied.

I do not know any clearer illustration of that principle than the brooding, tragic, tortured man who sits today in San Clemente, unable to enjoy the pardon he has been given because he is not willing to admit that he did anything wrong. That is why John preached repentance -- because it is the place where God meets man.

That is why the prophet Isaiah said John's message would be like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert for God to come to the isolated stranger in the midst of the wilderness. Without a road you cannot drive out into the desert in order to help somebody. You must have a road, a highway in the desert. John was God's bulldozer to build that highway. You know how roads are built -- exactly as Isaiah describes in Chapter 40. "Every mountain shall be brought low, and every valley shall be lifted up; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain," {cf, Isa 40:4a}. That is what repentance does. It brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on and refuse to admit are wrong. It takes the depressed areas of our life, where we beat and torture and punish ourselves, and lifts them up. It takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, and straightens them out. And it makes the rough places plain. Then God is there, at that instant

of repentance. Beautiful imagery, is it not? With this Mark links the character of John:

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. {Mark 1:6 RSV}

Why would Mark put all that in? Here is this rugged prophet John. He is no fashion plate, with his camel's hair clothes, leather sandals, and leather girdle around his waist -- very much like Elijah. And his diet was very simple: locusts (grasshoppers) and wild honey. This is important, or it would not be here. Again, it is symbolic. But what does it symbolize? Well, you cannot wear anything more fundamental in the way of clothing, or eat a more basic diet, than John did. In other words it is representative of his ministry -- one of simple beginnings. It is not the end; it is the beginning. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is repentance on man's part. That is the place to begin. Even John's clothing and his diet said that.

His diet, by the way, was balanced. You food faddists will recognize immediately that grasshoppers are protein, and honey is carbohydrate. John's diet was in beautiful balance, so that he was a healthy man. But it was a most elementary, rudimentary sort of diet, just as his ministry was elementary, rudimentary, beginning right at the beginning -- nothing elaborate, just simple meat and potatoes. Furthermore, John himself said it was incomplete:

And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." {Mark 1:7-8 RSV}

John is very honest here. He says, "Don't look to me for answers beyond what I have already told you about repentance. Anything beyond that must come from Another, who is coming right after me. He is so much greater than I that I am not even worthy to untie his shoes. [This was his cousin he was referring to!] The sign of his greatness is that though I can take you to the place of outward cleansing only, he can do much more," {cf, Matt 3:11, John 1:15}. In other words, John could bring people to God, but he could not take them beyond that, on with God. That required the life of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus came, he would baptize them with the Holy Spirit so that they could live on the basis they had begun on.

So much of Christian preaching today is on the same order as John's ministry -- designed only to bring people to God, and nothing more. It does not teach them how to live beyond that, and so people cannot go on. They know nothing of the power of the life of Jesus available through the Holy Spirit -- for all that was to come after John.

John brought people to Christ by the only way man can come -- through acknowledgment of guilt. When people come this way, God meets them, cleanses them, and forgives them. John demonstrated that by the baptism he performed. But there is a greater baptism -- that of the Holy Spirit. And on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came, you find Peter standing up and offering people two things: forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the Spirit. From that time on, this is what God has made available to any man or woman who will begin at the beginning -- the place of repentance.

Have you ever repented?

Have you ever changed your mind stopped defending yourself and trying to blame everything on others, and said, "No, Lord, it's not they, it is just me. This is the way I am -- and I need help."?

That is the place God will meet you. He always meets man at that point, washes away guilt, cleanses, forgives. That is where you will find forgiveness of sins. If you have never repented before, I urge you to do so now. God will meet you right there.

In the quiet of your own heart, where God alone hears, you can say to him, "Lord, I repent. Lord, send me the Holy Spirit through Jesus Lord." And he will.

If you are a Christian with a desert area in your life, and you do not know how to handle it, this is the place to

begin. Repent, acknowledge it, and God will meet you there, and wash it all away. He does not have a word of condemnation for you, just a word of cleansing -- if you meet him at that place of repentance.

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