

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING

SERIES: THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

By Doug Goins

This morning we begin a consideration of the New-Testament book, *The Gospel According to Mark*. Mark's story is unique in its sense of excitement, its enthusiasm. Mark is high energy. Some have said there is an urgency about this story, a breathlessness, or an abruptness to it. This gospel is action packed. While the other three gospels emphasize more the teaching of Jesus, Mark focuses on Jesus as a man of action in ministry; meeting spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of different people from every strata of society, as well as various racial groupings.

This gospel is more plain-spoken than the other three; the language in the original text being less beautiful. As the early church historian Eusebius tells us, it may be because Mark's gospel depends primarily on the memories of Peter and his account of the life of Christ. Remember, Mark was not one of the original eye witnesses. He wasn't one of the twelve like Matthew or John. Another early church leader named Papias wrote this about Mark's gospel around 140 AD:

Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately whatever [Peter] remembered of the things said and done by the Lord. Peter adapted his teachings to the needs of his hearers. Mark made no mistake for he fixed his attention on one thing: not to omit any of the things he had heard or to state any of them falsely. (1)

He listened to Peter teach and preach then gathered all that together, shaping it into his gospel. Perhaps the energy level of this gospel can be attributed in large part to Peter's influence by way of his personality, his temperament. He was impulsive, out-spoken, quick to move, all of which are captured in this story as well.

Our author's full name is John Mark. He may have been led to faith in Christ by the apostle Peter, who refers to Mark as "my son" in his first letter. Mark's mother was wealthy and owned a large home in Jerusalem and that home became a meeting place for the early church after Pentecost. Acts 12 tells us that when Peter was miraculously released from prison, he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark, where the church was gathered in prayer.

We also know that Barnabas was Mark's cousin (see Colossians 4:10). When the Antioch church sent out Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary adventure, they took John Mark along with them as, what we would probably consider today, a ministry intern. We learn in Acts 15:36-39 that Mark failed miserably on the trip—he couldn't take the difficulty of the travel and went back to his mother's house in Jerusalem. That desertion by John Mark caused a conflict between his cousin Barnabas and the apostle Paul, and Paul refused to take Mark with him on a second trip because of his failure the first time. (There was, however, a reconciliation between John Mark and Paul. Some of Paul's letters encourage us with the fact that he came to respect and value Mark, calling him a "fellow worker" (Colossians 4:10, 11; Philemon 1:24), and in 2 Timothy 4:11 he calls him a "useful servant" in Christ.)

Mark's passion in telling the story of Jesus is evident. As a young man, who grew up in wealth, he comes to personal faith fairly early in life. As mentioned already, he experiences bitter failure in his first attempt to do something for his Lord. His experience is similar to his spiritual father, Peter—his vehement denial of Jesus at his arrest, "I never knew the man," (see Matthew 26:69-75). Both Peter and Mark experienced God taking the failures in their lives and using it to turn them into effective servants of Jesus Christ. Both knew the joy of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of spiritual restoration. They had been powerfully shaped by the gospel—the same gospel they would eventually preach and write for us.

The theme verse for this gospel is Mark 10:45, where Jesus describes his mission: "For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." As we consider the first three chapters of Mark's gospel over the next few weeks, we will see that this theme—Jesus the servant, the One who serves even unto death—resonates throughout Mark's writing. We will see Isaiah's suffering Messianic servant, whom Scott Grant helped us encounter in his sermons series, *Songs of the Servant* (Discovery Papers 4781-4786).

In this gospel, Mark announces that God's servant has finally come and his name is Jesus. Mark is excited about the

life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and he echoes the same excitement as Peter preaching the gospel 50 days after the crucifixion of Jesus. Standing up in front of thousands of people in the city of Jerusalem at Passover, Peter proclaimed:

Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. And God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. (Acts 2:22-24)

The title of the gospel

Peter's summary seems to set the pace and serve as an outline to Mark's gospel. Mark's story begins very abruptly and ends abruptly. Verse one of chapter one begins immediately with the title of Mark's gospel: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Then this fast-paced telling of Jesus life, ministry, death and resurrection ends abruptly in 16:20, "And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed." Now that's the gospel in action!

Mark's is the earliest of the four gospels that were written, and as such it introduces a brand new literary form. All four phrases of his introduction to this gospel are very important (similar to our modern-day books where the storyline and theme is summarized in the dust jacket to hopefully grab our attention and give us the desire to read the entire book). Mark writes in verse 1:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark first speaks of the beginning. God is a God of beginnings. We see a similar opening in John's gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Both refer to a dateless beginning, an eternal beginning before all time; God the Father and God the Son co-existing eternally. We then move from eternity into time, as is found in the Genesis prologue: "In the beginning God created the heavens and earth" (Genesis 1:1). This universe had a beginning point. It was defined and determined by God, the Creator.

The introduction from 1 John also speaks of a beginning: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life..." John is speaking of Jesus, the man, in his adulthood. His disciples knew him intimately, they enjoyed friendship with him, and shared life and ministry with him.

Mark's gospel claims to have a *divine origin*. His first word of "beginning" alerts us to the fact that we're about to begin something brand new, something only God can accomplish; revelation of the good news of Jesus Christ. And this is something which deserves our careful attention.

Next, Mark refers to the gospel, another important word. Literally, "gospel" means "good news." Today, the word "gospel" seems to have a variety of meanings. Sometimes it suggests a message proclaimed: "Did he preach the gospel?" Sometimes it refers to trustworthiness or voracity: "It was the gospel truth." Sometimes, as we're using it this morning, it speaks of a book of the Bible: "We are studying the gospel of Mark." But in the first century it meant none of those things. For Mark to call the story of Jesus Christ the "gospel" would have surprised his readers whether they were Jewish, Gentile, Christian or non-Christian.

If his readers were first-century Christians, or Jews who really knew their Old Testament, it was a specific word that described God's activity; a message about God's restoration of his people, of God bringing salvation to his people. It's God establishing his rule, his reign, his kingdom on earth. Again, it's the same good news found in one of the servant songs that Scott Grant expounded for us in Isaiah: "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news [the gospel], who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" (Isaiah 52:7).

Now, if you were a first-century non-Christian or a new Christian with no background in the Old Testament, the word

“gospel” would have had a totally different meaning for you. You would have understood and associated “gospel” with the announcement of some significant event which is going to change world history. It was a word strongly associated with the Roman empire and with her emperors. The announcements of events like the birth of an heir to the emperor, or the coming of age of a young man in that process, or even the ascension to the throne of the Emperor. These empire-wide announcements were gospels, or good news. Here is an excerpt taken from such a “gospel” which was written before Mark wrote his:

The birthday of Augustus was the beginning for the world of the good news that has come to men through him.

This actually came from a very long, pretentious paragraph written about Caesar Augustus, who reigned just before the time of Christ.

In much the same fashion Mark makes his announcement, the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, “Jesus” was a common Jewish name. In Hebrew it was Joshua and meant “Yahweh is salvation,” or “God saves.” Matthew, in his gospel, draws particular attention to that when the angel commands Joseph, his father, “...you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). But, he is also Jesus *Christ*. “Christ” is his title. It’s one of the designations of the servant in Isaiah’s songs and means that he is the anointed one or the Messiah. This was the One the Jewish nation had longed for; God’s agent who would bring salvation to all the earth. In his gospel, Mark links them together—the Savior and the Messiah—in this one person who is the focus of good news, the focus of the gospel.

Jesus himself preached the good news, but he also *was* the good news. He was the message incarnate—the messenger is also the message. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). In other words, “Hear what I have to say and then respond to me personally. Enter into a relationship with me.”

Finally, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Even though almost everyone in Mark’s story has difficulty recognizing Jesus as the divine Messiah, we know who is he because Mark tells us right up front. In Mark’s gospel account, the only people who recognize Jesus as the divine Messiah, the Son of God, are the most hopeless people or demoniacs. The disciples didn’t recognize him, and even when they did, they wanted to deflect his course. They didn’t want him to be the kind of Messiah that he had come to be. But we get to know from the beginning, without hesitation, that Jesus is, in fact, God’s Son and his Messianic representative. And even though the people around Jesus didn’t understand, Jesus was very clear on this. He knew that he was the Son of his beloved heavenly Father, and he understood his Messianic mission.

For Mark, Jesus being the Christ and the Son of God is one in the same: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” During a lecture at the Mount Hermon Christian Center in the late 1960’s, the speaker quoted Dr. Paul Reese as saying, “the gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate, it’s an announcement.” Mark is sold out to that announcement—the good news that God’s Son has come into *our* world to die for *our* sins. Our sins are forgiven, we belong to the family of God and to one another, and one day we will live eternally with Jesus our Savior in heaven, and with one another, in perfect fellowship. The gospel is the announcement of the victory of the cross of Christ over sin and death and hell.

But Mark isn’t just writing this story to inform us. He wants to challenge us to faith. Again, there is an urgency about his story. The gospel isn’t written to entertain us; it’s much too serious for that as life and death hang on it. Look ahead to Mark 1:14, 15 to Jesus’ opening words which are crucial: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” More than just recording this urgent challenge for us to believe, Mark himself, as the writer, exemplifies the concern as well.

The promise of Scripture fulfilled

Following the opening verse, Mark begins his story with quotations from the Old-Testament scriptures. This is to emphasize that even though there is this new, awesome gospel, this event that’s about to explode, it’s been carefully prepared, in advance, by God:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

**“BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;
THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS,
‘MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD,
MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.’”** (Mark 1:2, 3)

Mark says that the events which follow didn't just happen out of the blue. These are prophetic promises, and he makes it clear that the appearances of John the Baptist, and then Jesus, are part of God's blueprint for history. The story is the beginning of the good news, but it's also a continuation of the story of God's saving activity.

The passage is really a mixture of three texts. In verse 2, Mark combines Malachi 3:1 with Exodus 23:20. Verse 3 is a paraphrase of Isaiah 40:3 (again, one of the servant songs). Mark brought together this collection of Old-Testament quotations because of their common theme, and then he attaches them to Isaiah, who would have been the best known biblical author (that was a very common practice in first-century Jewish Bible study).

The first preaching of the gospel

The messenger in verse 2 and the voice in verse 3 refer to John the Baptist. John was the prophet of God who was sent to prepare the way for his Son. In Old Testament times, the king of the nation, called “the anointed one of God,” was God's representative and was to reflect God's character toward the people. He was to rule in God's place over his people. And before the king would travel into a tribal area, a city, or a part of the nation, a messenger would be sent ahead of the king with two responsibilities. First, to make sure the roads were in good repair for the king's entourage to travel in safety. Secondly, to prepare the people to receive their king—to clean up the town, and clean up their lives in preparation for the king's coming.

John is the messenger preparing the way, and Jesus Christ is now the King. All of these prophetic voices declare that Jesus is “the Lord.” He is Yahweh God—the Anointed One who is coming. After centuries of waiting, God's preparation for the emergence of Jesus is almost over. The hoped for day of the Messiah's appearing is almost here. But first, John has to appear. He's got to be the forerunner, the messenger in fulfillment of these Old-Testament promises. In a sense, John is the first preacher of the gospel. What a wonderful responsibility, what a wonderful position and honor God gives John.

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:4-8)

John's ministry

Verses 4 and 5 focus on the coming of John, or to use Mark's word, the *appearance* of John. The verb “to appear” emphasizes his sudden emergence as part of God's purpose and plan. It has much greater meaning than simply saying, “So-and-so showed up at so-and-so's house.” It really emphasizes that John *exploded* onto the scene. Almost like an event in a magic show, where a huge puff of smoke occurs and when the smoke clears something that wasn't there before has suddenly appeared! Mark gives very little biographical information about John. But this fits in with Mark's style and the abruptness of his introduction of characters and events. People are taken by surprise when John shows up and they flock into the wilderness to hear him.

That John would appear in the wilderness just as the prophets had foretold is important. The wilderness had both an historical and a spiritual significance for those people who were grounded in the Old Testament. First, it was a place of testing. God led his people in the wilderness for 40 years, and it was 40 years of judgment because of their sin—their rebellion against him, their unwillingness to submit to him and love him and follow him. But it was also a place of

beginnings. That's where the nation followed their leader Joshua through the Jordan River, out of the wilderness, and into Canaan—the land of promise, their inheritance.

John calls the people to a radical repentance, meaning “to turn around,” to turn from sin and then return to God. That led to a baptism symbolizing the forgiveness of sin. Old Testament prophets always offered the people the opportunity for their sins to be forgiven. But it had to be based on sincerity of heart as they turned away from sin, repented of rebellion, and then turned back toward God, entering back into loving relationship with him. Baptism was the pledge—the physical, outward expression of repentance.

John's impact

John's impact, as Mark tells us in verse 5, is truly amazing—“all the country of Judea,” “all the people of Jerusalem.” John was recognized as an authentic, prophetic voice; the first one in 400 years. The last voice to speak for God was the prophet Malachi. Like the prophets of old, John was again telling the people, symbolically, that they were in a spiritual wilderness and it was a far worse place than the physical wilderness which their ancestors had endured for 40 years.

In the book of Joshua we read that as Israel was baptized through the Jordan River, after they repented of sin, the nation gathered on the eastern shore of the Jordan at a place called Shittim. They consecrated themselves, they repented of sin, and they were able to follow their leader Joshua through the Jordan River, being baptized to enter into a new life in the land of promise (see Joshua 3, 4). Now, John the Baptist is once again calling the people to leave their spiritual wilderness, to repent of sin, and to prepare to follow their new Joshua, Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Through Jesus they can enter into a new relationship with God, a new spiritual inheritance.

The significance of John the Baptist

We see the significance of John in this role in verses 6-8. Verse 6, in particular, highlights John's aim, his purpose in ministry: “And John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.” His wardrobe and his diet helped identify him. John was not just a “wilderness guy,” a health food fanatic who just liked hanging out in the wilderness. We tend to romanticize the wilderness, but it was actually an arid, desolate, unattractive, inhospitable place. As sociologist, Marshall Macluhan, put it: “the medium became the message.”

What John ate and how he dressed suggests a couple of things. First, John is not part of the religious or cultural mainstream. He would not have been a welcome guest at the Jericho Hilton, or on the faculty of Jerusalem Theological Seminary. The wilderness required a break with the religious institutions, the religious culture of first-century Judaism. Secondly, John is dressed like an Old-Testament prophet, specifically the prophet Elijah. The Jews were expecting Elijah to return just before Messiah because the prophet Malachi had predicted that:

“Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the LORD. He will restore the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, so that I will not come and smite the land with a curse.” (Malachi 4:5, 6)

The ministry of the forerunner is twofold: repentance and restoration. First, to challenge the people to repent of sin. If they are unwilling, God will smite them. There will be judgment. There will be punishment. But they don't have to experience that. There can be restoration if people repent of sin and acknowledge their desperate need of God. Their relationship to God will then be restored, as well as their relationships with others.

A Jewish rabbi from a later time is quoted as saying, “If all Israel repents for one day, then the Son of David will come.” The question that hangs over all of Mark's gospel then is, will they truly repent? And when the Son of David comes, will they recognize him, and will they receive him with open arms or with clenched fists? Of course, we already know the answer to those questions, don't we.

John's message

In verse 7 we see that John is very careful to magnify Jesus, not himself: "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. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." His preaching has to do with the promise of One more powerful, One who will soon immerse them in the Holy Spirit. John can't do that, but Jesus can. John can only announce his coming, and prepare the hearts of the people so that they will be responsive when Jesus shows up. John knows it's going to take more than immersion of their bodies in the muddy Jordan River to create in them a new heart or a right spirit. He acknowledges that his water baptism is preparatory. Jesus will come, he will execute the will of God, and will baptize them in the Holy Spirit. Even this progression is predicted by the Old Testament prophets:

"Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

These great "I wills" of God will only be accomplished through the greater, more powerful work of Jesus Christ on the cross. John the Baptist could not accomplish that. John comes as a voice crying in the wilderness. He comes as a lowly servant. And even though he's mightier, Jesus also comes as a servant. He didn't come to earth as some invincible warrior who is going to vanquish his foes with the sword. Nor did he come to wield the sword of judgment. He came to die a humiliating death on a Roman cross.

N. T. Wright, in his book *Jesus and the Victory of God* says,

John's magnetism and the mighty impact of his ministry anticipates the greater magnetism and the mightier impact of Jesus, the coming stronger one and of his ministry, just as John's death anticipates the death of Jesus. (2)

The good news today

So, the good news for us this morning is that God is the God of beginnings—God begins again with his people by sending his Son.

Oddly enough, things at the end of Mark's gospel seem to be far more uncertain than they do at the beginning. As we read in the last verse of Mark, there is an energy, an open-endedness, there is activity. But there are also negative things at work. For instance, Mark never deals with Peter's denial of the Lord (we see this only in John's gospel account). Also, in Mark's account of the resurrection, the women end up in front of the tomb terrified, fearful. They also can't get the disciples to believe the story of what they saw.

But even with Peter's denial of Jesus not having been resolved, and the women being fearful, our God is greater than all of that. Failure, denial and fear are never the end of the story. In God's history of salvation, when things seem to end there is always a new beginning. That means *we* can begin again. Think about Peter's denial, and the scattering of the disciples following Jesus' arrest. Think about the fear of the women, or even John Mark's abandonment of Paul and Barnabas on their trip. We know that for all of those people their failure wasn't fatal, and neither is ours. God always makes something out of nothing. What seems like the end or what may seem for us like the wilderness, some excruciatingly long, difficult place of limitation, or frustration caused by our own sin or somebody else's sin toward us, or perhaps the wilderness of physical suffering and struggle, in God's economy these are always the places of new beginnings.

God worked for centuries to bring his people to that specific place in the wilderness, to that time of renewal through John's ministry and he still does. It doesn't matter how arid our lives may be. Mark's story makes clear to us that we exist as the people of God, not because of the faithfulness or the effectiveness of Jesus' first followers. The original disciples in this story come across as somewhat pathetic. They don't understand who Jesus is, they don't understand his ministry, or that he's come to train them to continue his ministry. It really isn't until Pentecost, until they are baptized with the Holy Spirit, that it finally makes sense to them.

Working through this text has been a real blessing to me. I've studied it with the pastoral staff and another smaller group of men. What strikes me is how often we find ourselves in this story in terms of our cluelessness and our failures. When I consider my 20+ years of ministry here at PBC and all the times when I was afraid that God wasn't going to follow through on his promises, and the periods of disillusionment, of discouragement, times when I wondered whether I could go on, whether I had been disqualified from ministry, God has proven himself over and over again to be the God of new beginnings. He offers life out of death. A way through the Jordan River, out of the wilderness, in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul proclaims the gospel to us in Philippians 1:6:

For I am confident of this very thing, that He who *began* a good work in you *will perfect it* until the day of Christ Jesus. (Emphasis mine.)

The good news is that the gospel continues! As followers of Christ we are the latest chapter in this continuing story of God's good news. That's a word of hope. That's a word of promise. That's the gospel.

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NOTES:

- (1) Oden, Thomas C., General Editor, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture – Mark*. © 1998, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. Pp. 21-22.
- (2) N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*. © 1996, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN. P. 98.

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1st Message

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[Back to Index page](#)

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