

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 your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’”

John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

(Mark 1:1–8)

Introduction

We might call Mark’s prologue, “Words for Your Wilderness.” Let me explain.

If scholars are correct, Mark wrote his gospel in the late 50s for believers living in the Roman Empire. (Many believe that it was written particularly for Roman Christians.) Many of these Christians were undergoing something of a wilderness experience. As the very first of the new covenant Christians, they were learning what it means to have believed the good news in a bad news world. They were learning what Jesus meant when he told them to take up their cross and follow him (8:34).

Just as first generation Israel experienced the exodus from Egypt, these Christians were being exposed to wilderness difficulties following their exodus from the domain of sin’s darkness. Like those Israelites of old, these Christians were facing uncertainty concerning relationships, physical sustenance and, for some, life itself. Mark reminds them of the good news of Jesus Christ. He reminds them of the good news which *is* Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We need to be reminded daily of this very good news in an otherwise very bad world.

The wilderness motif is strongly present in the prologue of this book (vv. 3, 4, 12 & 13). The addition of the mention of Jesus being with the “wild animals” further strengthens the argument that Mark has wilderness difficulties on his mind. His Gospel (a new genre of biblical writing) is intended to strengthen believers in their faith, to remind them of the good news in the midst of their bad times. Do you need this reminder? It is true that “the

wilderness repeatedly represents in Israel's history a place of repentance, and hence a place of God's grace" (Edwards). And in our wilderness, we need this grace of the gospel as well.

For the Christian, life can sometimes be a desert of difficulties. Christians face the reality of trials on every hand. This is true of some more than others, to be sure; nevertheless, each of us can relate to the difficulties of life. But the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is precisely what empowers us to be fruitful in the midst of our foes and of our fears.

Recently, my wife shared with me something she read about fear. The author said that that fear is False Evidence Appearing Real. That is very useful. Our wilderness sojourn can conjure up all kinds of such fears—false realities that rob us of our joy. Mark's inspired solution is that we remind ourselves of God's cosmic salvific work of Christ.

If centuries of attestation are correct, then the author of this book is the John Mark, who apparently at one time gave into his fears and forsook his missionary partners (Acts 13:13; 15:37–38). As other New Testament texts reveal, he became a useful labourer for Christ (2 Timothy 4:11). In fact, he was even willing to lay aside his fears and personally attend to Paul while he was undergoing what would be his final imprisonment before martyrdom. Mark had overcome "false evidence appearing real," and it would seem that he did so by drinking deeply at the elixir of the good news, which is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. May this be our experience as well.

Another introductory observation is necessary. Based on a statement in 140 AD by Papias (who was a disciple of Polycarp, a disciple of the apostle John), it is commonly supposed that John Mark wrote what he learned from the apostle Peter. According to Papias, John claimed that Mark wrote down what Peter told him about the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Mark would have been exposed to Peter in the days of the early church. It is clear from Acts 12:12 that he was at his mother's home when Peter was miraculously released from prison. Peter tells his readers that Mark was with him in "Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13). From the contents of Mark (which we will note as we progress in our study), it seems evident that Peter would have been the source of information, especially since many of Peter's failures are humbly noted. Again, keeping in mind the wilderness motif, this is significant.

As an early follower of Jesus, Peter had experienced several wilderness failings. But, having been restored by the Lord to leadership in the church (John 21), he took seriously his calling to feed the sheep. And a huge part of shepherding the flock of God—the essential element—is to point the sheep to the Shepherd. With John Mark as his amanuensis, Peter reminded the flock of God of the good news of Jesus Christ. Peter knew what it was like to sin against the Saviour and what it was like to suffer for the Saviour. He was therefore well equipped

to point to the Saviour, thereby giving hope to Christians in their wilderness. He was keen to point Christians time and again to the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but rather to give his life a ransom for all (10:45). That is the good news of Mark.

As we begin our study of the Gospel of Mark, we may observe five truths about this good news (1:1–13). These truths will reappear several times throughout Mark's book. Each time that we encounter them, we should rejoice in this good news in a bad news world. We will consider only the first three of these truths in this study, but it may be helpful to note all five of them from the outset.

1. The good news is the announcement of a new creation (v. 1);
2. The good news is the fulfilment of an ongoing expectation (vv. 2–3);
3. The good news demands a radical proclamation (vv. 4–8);
4. The good news has divine commendation (vv. 9–11); and
5. The good news has full confirmation (vv. 12–13).

The Good News is the Announcement of A New Creation

Mark's gospel begins with familiar-sounding words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (v. 1). These words are somewhat reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, and remind us a little, therefore, of the creation account. Like the opening words of Matthew's Gospel, Mark's Gospel is about God's *new* creation. It is about the beginning of God making all things new (Revelation 21:5). Mark's Gospel is the good news that God brought in a new era by Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As Ferguson observes, "It was as though he were saying: Jesus is the One in whom I will begin again."

Mark's book opens with the declaration of this divine identity. It proceeds on the evidence of this identity (3:11) and closes celebrating this identity (15:39). It is Christ's identity as the Son of God that makes the good news possible.

The word "gospel," when describing the accounts of Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, is not merely another word for "biography." Yes, there is much recorded in these books that is biographical, but the writers record but a fraction of the 33 years of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. When Mark wrote this first verse, he was establishing a unique genre. This is a book that, while providing some biography, does so to reveal really, really good news for those who will hear it. It is the good news of God's salvation of the world through his Son. This is good news that all need to hear; but, in many ways, it is the good news that God's people *especially* need to hear.

This book is written for those who have heard and responded to the good news that their sins are forgiven by the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ – after his life

of sinless perfection. If you are a Christian, pay heed to this good news of Jesus Christ – this is for you! If you are not, listen in that you too might believe this good news.

This phrase can mean the good news *about* Jesus Christ, or the good news *from* Jesus Christ. It can mean both. Mark is telling us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *is* the good news. And this makes perfect sense, as we will soon see, because in Jesus Christ we have the culmination and fulfilment of everything that the old covenant pointed to. As I trust will become patently clear, the gospel is not merely good advice to ponder, it is good news to believe.

It is widely believed that Mark was the first of the Gospels to be written. One reason for this is that Matthew, Luke and John contain nearly all that is recorded in Mark. In other words, it is believed that Matthew, Luke and John expanded on this first Gospel. That may or may not be true. But what is true is that Mark seems to have been in a rush to get this good news published for those who desperately needed it; that is, to all who are in the world (16:15)!

Mark uses the Greek word “immediately” forty times. (Ferguson humorously notes, “In Mark’s Gospel, everything seems to happen ‘immediately’ or ‘without delay’. That sounds just like Simon Peter!”). Twelve of its sixteen chapters begin with the Greek word translated “and,” suggesting an urgency to get on with the story. For this reason, Mark is one of the best books you can study with someone you are evangelising. There is an urgency about Mark’s Gospel, precisely because there is an urgency about the gospel!

The Good News is the Fulfilment of an Ongoing Expectation

Mark jumps immediately to Scripture: “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight’” (1:1–2). This prophecy was fulfilled in Christ. At the outset of his gospel, therefore, “the turning point of human history was about to take place” (Ferguson).

As I have already noted, although the gospel was, in one sense, a new thing, essentially it was the culmination of an old thing: God’s everlasting covenant of grace (Hebrews 13:20–21). “Though Jesus’ coming is a new thing, it is not unanticipated or without advance warning” (Witherington).

The Old Testament, from the opening words of Genesis, pointed to the day when God would shine the light of his Son into the darkness of our sin-cursed lives and world (2 Corinthians 4:1–5a). All of the old covenant laws pointed to Christ; all of the sacrifices and the feasts pointed to him; all of the prophecies pointed to him – including these that are said to be from “Isaiah the prophet.”

These two verses contain the words from three verses: Exodus 23:20; Malachi 3:1; and Isaiah 40:3. If this is the right translation, Mark may simply be mentioning the prophet that sums up all three of these texts.

The Exodus 23:20 reference suggest that an exodus was on his mind. Just as the messenger of the Lord led the children of Israel through the wilderness all the way to the Promised Land, so John the Baptist was leading the *true* Israel of God through a wilderness on the way to the fulfilment of the Promised Land, the Lord Jesus Christ.

God had prophesied through the prophet Malachi that he would one day break the silence, and that his messenger would suddenly appear, announcing the coming of Messiah. In the context of that prophecy, it is clear that the nation of Israel may not be too thrilled when he arrived because he would cleanse things (see vv. 2–3). In other words, what John knew to be good news for God’s true people was *bad* news for those who were not his people – regardless of how religious they may be. The same holds true today. As we study Mark, it is my prayer that it will *be* good news for each of us.

The reference to Isaiah 40:3 is in a good news context of God comforting his true people with the announcement that the glory of the Lord will appear and therefore his people need to be prepared. This was John the Baptist’s calling. “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight” was a call to repent. As we will soon see, without repentance there can be no good news.

It is helpful for us to understand the Isaianic historical backdrop to this book, for then we will appreciate even more the sudden announcement of this good news in this opening verse.

It has been suggested that the book of Isaiah may be called “the Fifth Gospel.” This is because, after 39 chapters announcing God’s judgement upon Israel and upon Gentile nations, chapter 40 then opens with, “Comfort, comfort, my people.” Isaiah speaks of good news several times in what follows (40:9; 41:27; 52:7; 61:1). What becomes clear in the final 27 chapters of Isaiah is that Israel and the world should be expecting a much better day! These chapters focus on God’s suffering and saving Servant. It is as though the first 39 chapters summarise life under the old covenant while the final 27 chapters summarise life under the new covenant – exactly as the books of the Bible are laid out.

The opening words of the fortieth chapter of Isaiah – words prophesying and proclaiming the good news – contain the prophesy of John the Baptist. Isaiah 40:3 is thus quoted by Mark.

It is this light that we can better see that the new creation in Jesus Christ is not *new* news. Rather, it is old news with a new urgency; it is old news with a fresh expectancy; it is old

news that is about to become reality. And perhaps Mark's book is so breathlessly short because he just can't wait to tell this good news! That is, the "old, old story of Jesus and his love," which had been ordained before the foundation of the world, then typically pictured and prophetically promised has now arrived in space-time history.

Christian, we need to study Mark because it is as relevant to us as it was to the first century reader. The continuation of the good news throughout history provides us with the confidence that what we believe is rooted in what God has been planning and in what he has been doing since even *before* the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth. It is this sense of historical continuity that provides Christians with great confidence as we walk through our own wilderness. God has been up to a whole lot of good from *before* time as well as *throughout* time. He *still* is.

As you face your own dark wilderness of trials, where so often the silence screams, listen for the continuous voice of God's prophetic word: "Behold, I make all things new."

This Good News Demands a Radical Proclamation

John the Baptist now appears on the scene:

John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

(Mark 1:4–8)

Now we learn the identity of this prophesied messenger: It is John the Baptist. This man suddenly "appeared" on the scene, baptising the repentant.

Unlike Luke's Gospel, Mark does not provide us with any biographical information concerning this strangely dressed man. What we do know from this description, and from the previous quotations, is that he was an Elijah-like figure (see 2 Kings 1:8) who, like him, was a so-called desert-prophet. As Malachi 4:5 prophesied, this man would come to proclaim a new era with the opportunity to repent and to experience God's blessing.

John came "proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." If people would be prepared to receive their Messiah – their King – they would need to be cleansed; they would need to be converted. And this was a very radical message for first-century people to hear – as it is still is in our day.

William Lane helpfully writes,

The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. Both John's call to repentance and his baptism are intelligible as aspects of the prophetic tradition which expected the final salvation of God to be unveiled in the wilderness.

Baptism speaks of cleansing. A first century-reader would associate this rite with the need for cleansing. Even in many pagan cultures of our day, water rites are associated with religious purification. But for John, this was not merely about going through the motions. His call for "repentance" was a call for a fundamental, radical change of mind about who is Lord and King. Coupled with this was the expectation that the baptised repentant would have a change of life as well.

I won't spend our time in Mark comparing every passage with the parallel ones in Mathew, Luke and John, but in this case, it might be helpful to note that the other writers tell us that, when the religious elite pitched up to be baptised, he called them "vipers." Not exactly, seeker sensitive! He told the Roman soldiers that if they were true followers of God, they would need to content with their wages. John had no fear of man because he had a biblical fear of God. He preached the gospel and therefore he preached the necessity of repentance including confession of sin.

Hugh Latimer was a preacher who once preached a biblically faithful sermon before King Henry VII, denouncing the godless king and his courtiers. The king was angered, and commanded Latimer to appear before him again the next Lord's Day to recant the sermon he had preached. Latimer appeared before the king at the appointed time, and, announcing the same text that he had preached previously, began:

Hugh Latimer, dost thou know before whom thou art this day to speak? To the high and mighty monarch, the King's most excellent majesty, who can take away thy life if thou offendest; therefore take heed that thou speakest not a word that may displease! And then consider well, Hugh, dost thou not know from whence comest thou; upon whose message thou art sent? Even by the great and mighty God! Who is all present! and Who beholdeth all thy ways! and Who is able to cast thy soul into hell! Therefore take care that thou deliverest thy message faithfully.

Latimer was later burned at the stake under Mary Tudor, but he is remembered as one who boldly and faithfully proclaimed God's truth.

Friend, you do not need someone to say "peace, peace" when, in fact, you are at war with God. That would be very unloving. Rather, you need someone to tell you the truth, the

whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what God requires if you will be reconciled to him. You need a John the Baptist in your life. Please, let me be that to you today. Repent as you agree with God about your sin against him. Ask him for mercy to make you a new creation. Follow him in obedience (signified initially by baptism). Publicly identify with him and passionately follow him. Because of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, you can be forgiven today and every day. This is really good news that was at the heart of what John preached in vv. 7–8. And this is really good news today!

If people thought that John was powerful, they needed to know how much more powerful “Jesus Christ, the Son of God” is. John tells them in vv. 7–8. He makes it clear that Jesus Christ is so glorious that he felt unworthy to take off his sandals—a task deemed so lowly that only a Gentile servant was expected to do this. He explains Jesus’ exalted position and, by comparison, how far short he came, by pointing out that he performed water baptism (which anyone can do) but Jesus would do something that only God could do: baptise with the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps you recall when young Joshua was zealous for the honour of his mentor Moses. He was upset that Eldad and Medad were prophesying under the influence of the Holy Spirit. When Joshua pleaded with Moses to stop them, Moses replied, “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit upon them” (Numbers 11:26–30). Moses understood that only God can put his Spirit on anyone. Clearly, Jesus Christ is God. Small wonder John considered him “mightier than I.”

Of course, John was not minimising his baptism of repentance. This was what God had called him to proclaim and to do. Yet he was careful to make clear that his ministry was symbolic of what only God could do in substance. Only God can renew the heart. Only God can do inwardly what John’s baptism symbolised externally.

We need to see that Jesus Christ is the good news, for only he can change our lives—radically and supernaturally. By baptising with the Spirit those who believe on him, he profoundly and everlastingly changes lives. We need this change. Kent Hughes powerfully comments, “Christianity meets men and women in their radical need and provides a *radical* answer. If you do not know Christ, you are still in your sins. The Spirit’s baptism is the answer. When he drenches your life with his, you are changed!”

The good news is that God has broken into our sinful world, and into our sinful lives, to regenerate and re-create us by his Spirit. If you want this, then repent, confess your sins and publicly follow him.

AMEN