

The Good News

Mark 1:1-8

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The late Dr. R.C. Sproul used to say, “You can never go wrong preaching about Jesus.” In one sense, the entire Bible is about, and pointing to, Jesus. However, in the Gospels we read the story of His life and ministry in a way that is unique, focused, and precious.

The gospel of Mark is the shortest of the four gospels. It is likely also the earliest of the gospels. Most people believe Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark extensively. The Gospel of Mark (like the other gospels) is written as a testimony about Christ and not like a chronological biography. This would be called a “witness document.” Its purpose is to show reasons for putting faith in Christ.

As you read the memoirs of various of our Presidents, they generally arrange their memoirs thematically or topically. A strict “this happened and then that happened” would be somewhat disjointed because so many things are going on at once in the White House. It would be hard to follow the various topics. Consequently, the President tells stories to help you gain a general picture of their job. Mark writes somewhat the same way. So do the other gospels. Luke tends to group a bunch parables together that likely were given at various times. Mark focuses more on the actions of Jesus than the teaching of Jesus. Matthew and John are filled with long teaching sections (think “Sermon on the Mount” or John’s “Olivet Discourse in John 14-17.”)

Much of the information Mark has is likely from Peter because it is believed they spent a good deal of time together. In fact, the death of Peter (probably under Nero) may have prompted the writing of this gospel. Mark wrote his gospel likely sometime before 70 A.D. (when Rome came in and destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple). It was an interesting time in the history of Rome. When Caesar Augustus was Emperor (After Julius Caesar, the name “Caesar” was a title more than a family name), he declared himself to be divine. He was declared the “son of god” and was the one who would bring blessing to the people of Rome. This title was handed down to those who followed him as emperor.

When Nero came to power, the notion of the Emperor being a god began to teeter. Nero sought to destroy Christians and was a terrible human being. He tortured Christians in unspeakable ways. You may have heard the story of Nero playing the fiddle while Rome burned. In 64 AD there was a devastating fire in Rome. Once it was put out, another fire started. Some think Nero was the arsonist. Nero blamed the Christians and began his killing spree.

The Roman Senate finally had enough of Nero. They declared him an enemy of the state and he was supposed to be crucified, but he escaped, and eventually took his own life. After Nero’s departure, Rome had 3 emperors in quick succession; all of whom died violent deaths. Finally, the crown rested on the head of Vespasian. In a two-year time, Rome had 5 different emperors! (Imagine having 5 different Presidents in 2 years!) We can only imagine how cynical the people

were becoming about their leaders. The idea the emperor was a divine figure was now seen for what it was: rubbish.

This information makes the beginning of Mark's Gospel jump out at us. As Mark begins his gospel, he writes, "This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." Mark knew exactly what he was doing! He took this concept of the deity of the emperor and applied it to Jesus. The message is simple: "The TRUE Son of God" is Jesus. He is making a bold statement that could easily have gotten him killed.

The concept of "Good News" is also hijacked from Roman thought. But the idea was also familiar to the Jews because of the book of Isaiah (40:9 52:7)

In Isaiah 40:9 we read,

⁹ O Zion, messenger of **good news**,
shout from the mountaintops!
Shout it louder, O Jerusalem.
Shout, and do not be afraid.
Tell the towns of Judah,
"Your God is coming!"
¹⁰ Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power.
He will rule with a powerful arm.
See, he brings his reward with him as he comes.

Then in 52:7 we see the theme again.

⁷ How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who brings **good news**,
the good news of peace and salvation,
the news that the God of Israel reigns!
⁸ The watchmen shout and sing with joy,
for before their very eyes
they see the LORD returning to Jerusalem.

The argument of Mark is that Jesus was the one to whom the notion of good news referred. He affirmed the deity of Christ (His God-nature) in the first sentence of the book. Mark tells us, in essence, that this book is designed to show that Jesus is the only true Son of God, rather than the Roman emperors.

This is the key element that not only sets Jesus apart, but it is also the very reason this one man (God-Man) is able to give His life as a payment for the many who have come to Christ over the years.

The Forerunner

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began ² just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

"Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
and he will prepare your way.

³ He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,
'Prepare the way for the LORD's coming!
Clear the road for him!'"

⁴ This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. ⁵ All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. ⁶ His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

⁷ John announced: "Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I'm not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

Mark jumps into his story not with the birth narrative (like Matthew and Luke) but with John the Baptist (the Gospel of John has John the Baptist at the beginning of the book also).

Luke gives us some background about John the Baptist. We are told in Luke that John was likely six months older than Jesus and they were related. I have no idea how often their families got together over the years, but it appears they were related in some fashion (see Luke 1:36 where Elizabeth is called a relative of Mary's).

Because Mary was an unwed mother, she went to see her relative Elizabeth (perhaps to check out her story with an angel and also to get out of town to escape the ridicule of her condition and the subsequent embarrassment and shame to her family). When Mary arrived, John leaped in Elizabeth's womb as a way of acknowledging the Lordship of Christ.

Because John's parents were old (beyond child-bearing years) when he was conceived, they would likely have died early in John's life. He knew the Word of God, and saw himself as a prophet. He dressed like Elijah, and ate locusts and wild honey, food that God supplied.

Mark took passages from Exodus, Malachi and Isaiah and put them together to attest that John was the forerunner of the promised Messiah. And when you listen to John talk, John believed himself to be the forerunner.

Was John Elijah?

In the last two verses of the Old Testament we read these words,

"Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. ⁶ His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.

(Malachi 4:5-6)

At every Passover, Jews leave an empty chair for Elijah, the one who would precede the coming of the Messiah. It had been 400 years since a prophet had come to Israel. The people were eagerly waiting.

When John showed up on the scene dressing, eating, and sounding like Elijah it was natural for the people to ask him, "Are you the Elijah who was to come?" John said he was not Elijah. He was John, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

However, when Jesus was asked if John was Elijah, He said he WAS the Elijah that was to come. (Matthew 11:4). Is this a contradiction in the Bible? It is not! John was not literally Elijah, he had come in the *power and spirit* of Elijah. He fulfilled the prophecy, even though he was not the person Elijah.

The Message of John the Baptist

John's message to the people was simple: they needed to be washed and cleansed from their sin because the Messiah was coming. At that time it was common for Gentile converts to be baptized (or cleansed) from their sin. This was not something a Jew (one of the Chosen Ones) would do. What John was saying was radical and uncomfortable. The Pharisees objected to this teaching. We see more of what John taught in Luke 3

⁷ When the crowds came to John for baptism, he said, "You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee the coming wrath? ⁸ Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God. Don't just say to each other, 'We're safe, for we are descendants of Abraham.' That means nothing, for I tell you, God can create children of Abraham from these very stones. ⁹ Even now the ax of God's judgment is poised, ready to sever the roots of the trees. Yes, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire."

¹⁰ The crowds asked, "What should we do?"

¹¹ John replied, "If you have two shirts, give one to the poor. If you have food, share it with those who are hungry."

¹² Even corrupt tax collectors came to be baptized and asked, "Teacher, what should we do?"

¹³ He replied, "Collect no more taxes than the government requires."

¹⁴ "What should we do?" asked some soldiers.

John replied, "Don't extort money or make false accusations. And be content with your pay."

As you can see, John did not pull any punches. The thing about John is that he wasn't concerned about being popular. He had a job to do, and he did it. He was preparing the way for the work of Jesus. John knew he was a "role player." In fact, John told people that he was not fit to untie the sandals of the Messiah. When John saw the Messiah as recorded in John 1, he told two of his disciples (believed to be Andrew and Philip) to go and follow Jesus! When Jesus was becoming popular his disciples were interested in finding ways to increase John's market share. John however replied, "He must increase, I must decrease." He was a man who was clear on his purpose.

Applications

This, of course, is just an introduction to the Gospel of Mark but already I hope you see some important truths.

Jesus alone is the true and only Son of God. He alone is the One who saves. We continually look for individuals to save us. We need the right man (or woman) in office, we need the right person at the helm of our company, we need the athletic star to get us "over the hump." We look for celebrity teachers and preachers. Like the Romans, we are often guilty of elevating human beings and treating them as if they were gods.

What we need cannot be gained from an individual. We need Jesus. We don't can't perform some religious act and solve the sin and alienation problem in our lives. We must be baptized by the Holy Spirit! He must make us alive. It is the Spirit that brings us to faith, not the works of men. It is the Holy Spirit who gives us the power! He is the One who changes our hearts and lives. To look elsewhere is to be looking in the wrong places.

Our Job is to point to Jesus and then get out of the way. John was an expert at this. He spoke the truth boldly. The crowds gathered, but John remained grounded. He knew He was not the answer to the problems of the people – Christ was.

It is easy to get sucked into seduction of the bright lights. People tell you how much you helped them, they tell you how "special" you are, in some cases they swoon before you. Just one time I entered an office and one of the people of the office and ran over and said, "Oh I have been so looking forward to meeting you." I admit, I was taken off guard. I don't remember what I said but it might have been: "Why?"

If you hear this kind of stuff often enough you can start believing that you are the one that can solve the problems of the people. We see this most clearly in government. It is easy to think that YOU are the answer to the country's problems.

Let's be clear: WE will never be able to solve the world's problems. This is because it is a spiritual problem, not a political one. Only the Lord solve these problems. He is the Redeemer, the Savior, the one who restores lives and relationships. He uses people to accomplish many of

His purposes, but He can only do this when the people realize where their source of power and influence is coming from.

When people tell you that you are “great,” thank them for your kindness and then let them know that you are not really great . . . what they are seeing is really Christ working through us. That is a privilege that should never be taken for granted or forgotten. Our mission is not to build our Kingdom but His. It is not to gain name recognition; it is to point people to Him. Bishop JC Ryle wrote,

The principal work of every faithful minister of the Gospel is to set the Lord Jesus fully before his people, and to show them his fullness and his power to save. The next great work he has to do is to set before them the work of the Holy Spirit, and the need of being born again and inwardly baptized by his grace. These two mighty truths appear to have been frequently on the lips of John the Baptist. It would be good for the church and the world if there were more ministers like him.¹

People cannot make sense of grace until they first realize their sin and need of forgiveness. John’s purpose as a forerunner was to prepare the way for the message of Christ. Here is a simple truth: people will not be receptive to a Savior if they don’t believe they have anything from which to be saved.

Obviously, we could become obnoxious pointing out sin and transgression in the life of the people around us. That is not helpful . . . it alienates others. But if we, as fellow sinners in need of grace, help people understand the reality of sin, we will be preparing the way for people to meet the Savior.

How do you make people aware of their sin? First, we need to define sin. It is any word, thought or deed that is done for selfish or godless reasons. Second, we need to show people that even the smallest sin puts us in line for judgment before a Holy God. There are of course bigger sins and lesser sins but they are all sin! They are all an offense before a God who is absolute in His Holiness. This sin must be dealt with, or we will spend our lives and our eternity as God’s enemies.

I like to use the illustration that even if I sinned only 3 times a day (an impossibly good day for me) and even if I could keep that going, it would still be 21 sins in a week. Even if I maintained that would be over 1092 sins in a year . . . over 71,000 by the time you were 65. That is not an insignificant number. If you had that many parking tickets, would it be considered a big deal?

Remember, the goal is not to make people feel small, it is to help people see their need. And it is always important that we let people know that we are condemned just like they are. We ALL need a Savior. And once you understand that, you will be ready for Jesus to call you.

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 4.