

He Who is Mightier

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 1:1-9

Introduction:

Today we are starting a new series, working our way through the gospel of Mark. Mark is the shortest of the four gospels but packed full of content. As we begin to study this letter, it is helpful to note a couple of things before we start to unpack it. First, that the gospels aren't written like modern biographies where each author is detailing stories with as much precision as possible and putting them together in chronological order. Each gospel is composed in such a way to communicate specific theological truths about Jesus through their historic account of His life. As Mark Strauss, in his book "Four Portraits, One Jesus," says, the gospels are "historical narrative motivated by theological concerns." The gospels show characters from varying perspectives and move their plots along in different ways to create a specific portrait of Jesus. Imagine if you were to sit for portrait shots. The photographer has you sit, first facing them, then turned to the side, and then the other side. Each picture will be of the same person, but the different portraits highlight different things about that person. It wasn't uncommon to do this at the time and they closely resemble what are called a Greek Bioi, biographies that focused primarily on the virtues and teachings of important people over events. The second thing to note is that Mark's gospel was originally written to a specific audience, and its content is tailored to that audience. The consistent evidence throughout the writings of the early church fathers' point to John Mark as its author, a companion of Paul and Barnabas, as well as Peter's interpreter, recording his experiences. In fact, if you read Mark's gospel and the accounts of Peter speaking in Acts closely together, you will almost hear Peter's language in various accounts recorded by Mark. This gospel was likely written sometime in the mid to late AD 60s from Rome after Peter's death. It was written first to Christians in Rome and Italy, experiencing suffering under Nero's reign. It's structure helps us to see Mark's particular portrait of Jesus. Mark 1:1-13 provide a short series of events prior to Jesus beginning His ministry from Galilee, serving almost as a prologue to the rest of the letter. Verse 14 of chapter 1 through chapter 8 verse 30 focus on the ministry of Jesus in and around Galilee, and Mark 8:30-16:8 shifts the focus to Jesus' movement towards Jerusalem, to die and rise again. The almost even halves of this gospel are centered around 2 major themes. The first half, up to Mark 8:30, points to the divine authority of Jesus, as the mighty Son of God, and the promised Messiah from Isaiah's prophecies. The second half, from Mark 8:31 to the end shifts to present Jesus as the suffering Son of God, connecting him with Isaiah's depiction of the suffering servant of the Lord. What triggers the shift is Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, or the Messiah. Immediately following this confession, Peter attempts to rebuke Jesus after Jesus speaks of His pending death, and Jesus rebukes Peter for not setting his mind on the things of God. The structure of Mark, and this central confrontation with Peter show that we need to see Jesus as both Mighty and Mild. As the Son of God, with power and authority, who suffers for the sake of His people. As we move through this gospel together, keeping these things in mind will help us to see Mark's portrait of Jesus and stand in awe of the gospel of the glory of Jesus Christ. Let's dive into these first verses in Mark 1:1-9 together. The opening verse communicates an important truth about the gospel, or good news, that

THE GOOD NEWS IS CENTERED ON A PERSON

Notice the intentionality in verse 1, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This opening is packed full of intentionally important language, laying a foundation for what follows. By the time this letter is received, the gospel has spread and those who have believed in Jesus Christ have heard of His life, death, and resurrection. Mark compiles his account mainly as a reminder of who Jesus is and what this gospel means. He starts with an intentional Greek word for "beginning" that links back to Genesis 1:1, "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Through this, he is reminding his readers that God has done something entirely new in history through Jesus, something equivalent to His activity in creation.

And there is more significance here. He says, “The beginning of the gospel” At first glance this doesn’t stand out to us because we understand gospel as primarily a Christian term, but those who first received this letter, especially the people of Rome, would have seen a significant connection. The term is *euangelion*, meaning gospel or good news. And there is a recovered calendar inscription of Priene that uses this term in connection to an edict in 9 B.C., within a decade before the birth of Jesus, pronouncing that the birthday of Caesar Augustus “was the beginning of the Good News [*euangelion*] for the world.” Mark is likely connecting to this. The importance of this opening continues, look at verse 1 again, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This gospel, this good news, is of the person of Jesus, proclaimed by Mark through the name given Him and two titles. Jesus is the name given by the angel of the Lord, meaning “Yahweh is salvation.” Christ is a title meaning Messiah or anointed one. And Son of God is another title, revealing His special relationship with God, which, by the time this gospel had been written, would have pointed specifically to His divinity. The title Son of God actually bookends this gospel, coming again at the conclusion of the crucifixion as the confession of a Roman Centurion, showing its importance. Jesus is the Christ. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the King of the kingdom of God. Church, the good news of the gospel is Jesus Christ. And Mark’s gospel is the beginning of the story of His glory, which is the summation of all His worth, beauty, and goodness. This is so important to see, because if Christianity for you is only about the things God does for your life and not about the good news of Jesus, you have sadly missed the point of it all. I was significantly impacted by a question years ago from a book I that essentially asked this, if you could have all the benefits of heaven and the Christian life without having Jesus, would you be satisfied? Church, the Christian faith is not primarily about a way of doing life better, but the way of true life being found in knowing and treasuring the person of Jesus Christ. The rest of this opening, then, begins to focus in on why Jesus Christ is so significant, and what He did, by pointing to the work and message of His forerunner, John the Baptist. There are 2 main things Mark reveals about John, as the forerunner of Jesus. First, that

JOHN FULFILLED THE PROPHECIES OF ISAIAH

Look at what Mark records next in verses 2-3 with no hesitation, “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,’” Pause right there. We first need to note that this is actually quotes from three Old Testament texts. Mark Strauss sums them up well saying, “(1) Exodus 23:20, which announces that God’s ‘messenger’ (angel) will lead Israel in exodus through the wilderness to the Promised Land; (2) Isaiah 40:3, which proclaims a glorious new exodus that God will accomplish; and (3) Malachi 3:1, which warns of the messenger who will prepare God’s people for the Lord’s coming and the day of judgment” (p. 179, “Four Portraits, One Jesus”). It is not wrong of Mark to cite Isaiah for these, as it was a common practice in that day, and Isaiah is the major prophet pointing to God’s promised salvation and Messiah. There is so much within these citations we could cover, but I want to draw attention to one main thing. When citing Malachi 3:1, Mark slightly alters the language from “prepare the way before me,” in Malachi, to “prepare your way” in our passage. And when citing Isaiah 40:3, he moves from “make straight...a highway [path] for our God” to “make his paths straight.” This slight change is the Spirit of God moving him to help us see John’s ministry and Jesus as the fulfillment of these Messianic prophecies, with Jesus as God Himself coming. We are going to see Mark quickly move from John’s ministry of preparation in verse 4, to his proclamation of someone coming in verse 7, which is almost immediately followed by Jesus coming in verse 9. John is the voice in the wilderness, preparing the way, and Jesus is the Son of God. Pay attention, next, to how John specifically fulfills the ministry of preparation. Look at verse 4 with me, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” In the flow of the narrative John appears immediately as the one baptizing in the wilderness and His baptism was a proclamation, a heralding work, calling all to come repent for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is a willful act to change one’s mind.

Forgiveness is the cancelation of the debt and guilt of sin. These things must be taken together as one proclamation. The call is to turn around, recognize your sin, change your minds about what is valuable, and receive forgiveness. When John spoke this, it was a precursor for the call of faith in Christ, because the blood of Christ had not been shed yet to fully wash us clean, but now it calls us to trust in Christ's finish work on the cross. Next, through exaggerative language, Mark highlights the impact of this preparation in verse 5, "And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins." Don't glaze over this lightly, people were responding to the cry in the wilderness. They were acknowledging and confessing their sin. The way of the Lord was being prepared. Now, consider verse 6 with me, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." Why is this detail here? That is honestly one of the best questions you can ask while studying Mark. I believe the significance is its connection to the description of the prophet Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8, who we read, "wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist." The people of Israel were waiting for a prophet like Elijah, or Elijah himself to come before the Lord, and Mark intentionally includes this description of John the Baptist to show He is that prophet. Elijah is also a repeated name we will hear throughout Mark's gospel, all the way into the crucifixion, with Jesus Himself pointing to John as the fulfillment of that promise in Mark 9:11-13. These verses point to John fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah, in order to connect to the rest of Isaiah's prophecies through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus seen in this gospel. And they also draw our attention to the details of John's preaching in verses 7-8. Which is the second thing Mark reveals about John, as the forerunner of Jesus. How

JOHN PAVED THE WAY FOR ONE WHO IS MIGHTIER

Matthew and Luke focus give more details about John's message, but Mark focus on only on a few statements. Look at how verse 7 begins, "And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I." The main point is clear, someone more powerful than John is coming. I think this is even more pronounced from the embellished way Mark records people's response to John. It is as though Mark is having John almost saying to those people, "You sense that I am from the Lord, a mighty prophet of God. You are coming to me out of hope and responding rightly. But there is someone more powerful coming and just wait till you see Him." John wasn't sufficient for what people needed. His baptism wasn't enough. His work was only paving the way for what we needed. We needed one who is mightier to come and win the war. We needed one who could secure the final victory of Satan, sin, and death. And we needed one to provide us with a cleansing that goes deeper than the Jordan River could have ever gone. And the flow of this introduction helps us to see beyond a shadow of a doubt the one we need is Jesus. Follow the flow of verses 7-9 with me. Verse 7 has John saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I," then verse 9 moves straight from John as the focus to Jesus, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee." Jesus is the one coming after John who is mightier than he was. One commentator even points out an allusion to a later parable in chapter 3 where Jesus will relay that He is powerful enough to bind Satan as the strong one. Church, we may know the ending of the story. We may know the gospel and the sacrifice Christ may on the cross, but we should never stop reminding ourselves that Jesus is the mighty one, the only one able to secure our salvation. And we should never stop marveling at this truth. To help us remember and marvel, notice 2 aspects of this truth John's message highlights in verses 7-8. Starting with how

1) JESUS IS INFINITELY GREATER THAN JOHN

Note how vivid Mark is with John's language at the end of verse 7, "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." We need some historical background information to help this land properly. During the time of the New Testament, stooping down to untie a master's sandal wasn't even a task required of Hebrew slaves. It was too degrading and too menial for them to even do. Yet, John says, he is not even worthy to do something like that. The contrast of worth in this statement couldn't be greater.

Here is the truth church, no one has ever, or will ever come close to even beginning to pale in comparison to the greatness of Jesus Christ. Take all of your greatest heroes throughout history, everyone you admire and look up to, anyone you think has qualities of value at all, and put them on one side of the scale. Then put Jesus on the other, and the scale would tip over from the infinitely greater value of Jesus. It would be like comparing the worth of a potato chip to a feast with all your favorite foods. Or a penny to mounds of gold. Nothing compares to His glory and worth. No one compares to His value. This is what it ultimately means to call Him Holy. He is completely set apart in worth and value. Take that in for a moment, then understand that is the one who suffered, bled, and died for you. God the Son came and gave His life to make a wretch His treasure. Before we move on, let's consider the humility of John for a moment. Do you notice what caused John's humility? It was knowing his worth in comparison to the one coming. He was a great man, and people were coming to him for the preparation they needed. He could have propped himself up as the one to follow, and built a strong following, but when he considers the glory of Jesus, he responded with humility. Are you a prideful person? Then you probably haven't seen Jesus clearly. Is this a struggle, and you want to grow in humility? Then turn your eyes to Jesus more often. Because when you consider His glory, you will see yourself rightly before Him. Let's continue in our passage. The next aspect of this truth John's message highlights is how

2) JESUS' BAPTISM IS INFINITELY MORE VALUABLE THAN JOHNS

Notice the contrast in verse 8. John says, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John points to his baptism with water and essentially says it doesn't compare to the baptism Jesus will give. John's baptism of water proclaimed repentance and forgiveness, but God's people would still need power. John's baptism represented a ceremonial outward cleansing with water, but God's people needed a cleansing of the heart. John's baptism represented the futility of what we could do on our own, because God's people needed Him to provide the greater and everlasting change promised in Ezekiel 36 of a new heart. "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." What a glorious truth! Christ came to bring the Spirit of God to all who believe. The Spirit that seals us in His grace. This pointer to the Spirit also sets up the scene to follow, which we will look at next week, where we see the Spirit fall on Jesus, further fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah. Ones like Isaiah 11:1-2, speaking of the Spirit resting on the "shoot from the stump of Jesse," Isaiah 42:1 showing the Spirit being on the chosen servant of the Lord, and Isaiah 61:1 where the Spirit is upon the herald of good news. Jesus Christ is the Spirit empowered servant of the Lord, and the Son of God who came to save and give the Spirit of God to all who call on Him in faith.

Conclusion:

As Pastor David and the team are coming to lead us in responding to God's Word today, let's reflect on what we have seen in this passage. Church, the gospel of Jesus Christ never gets old because it is not simply a collection of truths we believe in, it a person we cling to and are delighted by. The truths we hold to in the gospel of the forgiveness of our sin through the blood of Jesus, and eternal life through His resurrection, are good news because it gives us all of eternity to know and love the glory of Jesus Christ. The call from our passage today is to seek to know Him more clearly. Do you know Christ Jesus as the Son of God, eternally existing as the true God of true God, taking on flesh to walk among us? Do you see Him as the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises to all who believe? Has His blood washed you fully clean? Do you have the Spirit? If not, confess your sins and receive salvation today. If so, do you see him as of infinite more value than anyone or anything else in this world? How is God leading your heart to respond to these truths today? Take this time to respond as you are lead. Come and pray if the Lord leads. We also have a team of people prepared to pray for you if you need someone else to pray. They will be in the front corners or right at the bottom of the stairs in the back. Let's press into the Lord's leading and worship Him with joyful singing.

Pray with me as we move into this time of response.