

The Gospel Begins

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[0:00] Well, we're going to be in Mark's Gospel, chapter 1, verses 1 to 15. It's on page 836 of the church! If you've got one of those in front of you. Mark chapter 1, starting at verse 1.

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 path straight. John appeared, baptizing 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 baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel hair, and wore a leather belt around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. But I have baptized you of water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In those days, Jesus came up from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open, and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness for 40 days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

[2:07] Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.

This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the beginning of the most important story in human history, one that all of creation had been longing for.

This is the beginning of Mark's gospel, of a gospel that in believing it, in believing the good news of Jesus Christ, can change a person's destiny forever, saving them from hell and punishment and God's wrath, and to eternal life with God.

For some of us, we're beginning again with Mark's gospel. This might be the second, third, tenth, hundredth time some of you have read through Mark together.

Some of you are so familiar with Mark, you wonder if you will ever hear anything new in this gospel yet. Friends, what a wonderful thing to be met afresh with the truth about Christ this evening.

[3:27] To dive once again into this beautiful story that has so transformed our lives, and to taste his goodness, growing in deeper knowledge of our Savior. Maybe some of you feel like you need a new beginning.

You know that you've compromised, that you've wandered away from Christ in your actions, and you feel as if you want to begin again. Friend, if that's you, hear again the good news of the gospel for you this evening, as you are met once more of a Savior who loves to forgive and save sinners. And as one commentator puts it, warm your heart by the fire of the gospel. Maybe for some of you, you are very new and fresh to the Christian faith, and possibly this series in Mark is the first time you've ever been through a whole gospel like this in a church.

So prepare to see the Lord Jesus laid out before you in all his glory, his deeds and words, the Savior who bought you at the cost of his own life, who called you to live a life with him as Lord, but also as Redeemer and brother and friend.

But maybe for one or two in this room, tonight is the very beginning. Maybe you're just looking in, maybe you're not sure what, or even if you believe. Possibly you've just arrived at university, maybe a friend has brought you along and you're just very unsure.

[4:57] But this gospel could be the beginning of a lifelong journey with Jesus, the first step in meeting and knowing the one who is already Lord of your life, if only you would know him.

That we are about to read of God taken on flesh, walking with us, however you arrive tonight, we're all being invited by Mark through this gospel to see Jesus, to listen and to believe in him and put our faith in him.

This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This is the beginning of the gospel.

If you're following along on the sheet, it's our second point there, the gospel. The question is, what is a gospel? It's a word that we throw around an awful lot in the church. The word originally simply means the good news.

It was used back in the first century in Mark's day to herald something like a royal birth or a victory, something important to be proclaimed to everyone. Hear the good news.

[6:07] Hear the gospel. It's a term that we've used throughout Christian history for the four accounts of Jesus' life. And Mark's account historically is believed to be told from the perspective of the apostle Peter.

This first section acts as a trailer for Mark's whole gospel. What we're reading this evening is like reading the Cliff Notes version for everything else that we're going to see all the way through till Easter.

Mark doesn't go into almost any detail in some of these verses, but it's going to lay the groundwork for this whole account. But the first thing Mark shows us in verses two to eight is that this gospel comes with a history.

The very first line of the gospel tells us that Jesus is the answer. He's the one we're looking for. But that begs the question, well, if Jesus is the answer, what is the question that Jesus is answering? And Mark launches right in in verses two and three with a composite quote from the Old Testament, two verses from two different prophets all put under the banner of Isaiah, telling us that this gospel flows right out of God's history with his people.

[7:26] God's big story that he's been telling the whole time. So verse two there is a quote from the final prophet in Israel's history, Malachi. If any of you are taking notes, Malachi three verse one says, behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come.

If you were to read on in Malachi, the day when the Lord comes will be a day of purification and refinement. when the Lord takes his people who are a mess and turns them into a people of perfection who can worship his name.

But do you spot the subtle change that Mark made in verse two? Malachi says, I'll prepare your way. But who does Mark mean?

Mark has already said this is about Jesus. And Malachi says, the Lord himself is coming. Mark says, here Jesus is. Lord himself is coming.

Additionally, that Isaiah quote in verse three comes from Isaiah 40, which Ailey read for us earlier. We'll just read again Isaiah 40 verse three. A voice cries, in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord.

[8:43] Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. When Isaiah says, Lord, he says it in full capitals, the way our English translations of the Bible take the covenant name of God, the name that God had revealed to his people in history, Yahweh.

Isaiah says, a voice in the wilderness prepared the way for Yahweh to come. And Mark says, here Jesus comes.

Isaiah said that someone would come in the wilderness and when God came, he would bring comfort, restoration, and forgiveness to the people who had been waiting for him for so very long. So when Mark says, make his path straight, Mark is just telling us through these Old Testament quotes, Jesus is God. Jesus is the Lord of our history.

Jesus is the God of Sinai and the wilderness and the Exodus. Jesus is God. We now have to read this entire gospel with that in our minds.

[9:52] Every time Jesus talks to a disciple, God is speaking. Every time a Pharisee disagrees with Jesus, they are disagreeing with God Almighty. And if we could only but keep that information in our heads, how we would read this gospel.

Because Jesus is God in the flesh and as Mark has already said, this is the gospel of Jesus, the Son of God. And we'll come back to that a bit later. But imagine it's the first century.

You're a Jewish person. You've tried to be faithful to your God but your nation has been in political chaos for hundreds of years. You don't really have a king in any meaningful sense.

You're a vassal state of the Roman Empire. You couldn't seem less significant in the eyes of the world. And you have all these prophecies and all this history of the God of the universe saying that you are his people and yet you feel so small.

Silence from heaven for 400 years, not a whisper from a prophet. And then, a messenger.

[11:04] And not just a messenger, a messenger in the wilderness. Now, as we'll see with many things in Mark's gospel as we go, there's almost a frustrating lack of detail.

I think more than any of the other gospels, I read Mark and think, couldn't you have told me more at this point? Please, Mark. And Mark just wants you to get the main thing about Jesus. Because all of a sudden, there's a messenger in the wilderness.

And if we were reading Isaiah and Malachi, the conclusion is, God's about to arrive on the scene. Maybe it's judgment day. You might think if you're a first century Jew.

So John the Baptist appears. And in verse 6, he's clothed with camel's hair, wearing a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey, strangely dressed, dietarily weird.

You've got to ask the question, is this just a raving madman in the desert? But again, if you look at the Old Testament, John is dressed as the prophet Elijah.

[12:09] The prophet who spoke through the low point of Israel's kingship to bring them back to the Lord. And that makes sense. Because almost the very last line of the Old Testament is the prophet Malachi saying that one day, an Elijah-like figure would come.

Malachi says, Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And John appears in the wilderness dressed as Elijah.

Here comes the great and awesome day of the Lord. And that gives these people a real and true hope.

Because this gospel is full of hope. because where is the last place you'd ever go looking for hope or anything whatsoever? Well, the wilderness, the place of emptiness, the place where there is nothing, the place where you wander off, get thirsty, and die.

But from the wilderness, almost like a new creation again, here is a new beginning because John comes baptizing. Now, some of you were around, no doubt, for Lewis' baptism this morning.

[13:22] I joy to share that together. Baptism is a symbol of purification. Like the ceremonial cleansing at the temple of God's people in their history, John is performing an action that means these people are symbolically purified by God and welcomed into a relationship with him.

But notice verse 4, he is proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John's message is, come to me and there is a way to be forgiven of your sin, a way to truly repent. Something that these people cannot do for themselves. Something that God himself is doing because who else is sin against but God himself. And with John's proclamation, hope finally appears in a wilderness, a geographical wilderness and a wilderness of history and a wilderness of God's word and all of a sudden hope.

Forgiveness is possible. There is a cure for our sin, repentance that is effective. The barrier that separates man and God, all of a sudden we are told there is a way past it, beyond it and back to him.

And this is such big news that the entire city of Jerusalem and half the land of Judea emptied just to come to John. Imagine all the residents of Aberdeen City walked out of their buildings and half of Aberdeenshire drove to one spot in the middle of the River Dee just to confess their sins to one man.

[15:08] Partially, imagine the sheer chaos of that many people. But are you beginning to get a sense of how big a deal this was? How long these people had waited? How joyful the hope that there would be a way beyond their sins and back to God?

And rightly so, John points away from himself and to someone greater. Verses 7 and 8. John's just a messenger and he knows that.

He knows that the one he proclaims is going to be the Lord himself. John can make his people outwardly clean. symbolically clean by the one who is coming.

He can clean their very souls. He can baptize them with the very spirit of God himself, true forgiveness of sin and once and finally, unity with the God who made you.

That is the great hope that John proclaims. And if what John's saying is true, then it will change everything. So can you feel the anticipation in Mark's gospel, standing on the precipice of history to an event so climactic that it tore all of history into and changed the world.

[16:40] Friends, that is the good news. That is when Jesus comes and is how big that news is. Because God is coming and he's promised to forgive and to judge and to save.

and John says he is here. What happens when God comes to town? Well, we have to keep reading to find out and we're going to be spending a good long time in Mark's gospel.

But we need to find out who this Jesus is. Because this is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Our final point there, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus is at the center of this gospel. And maybe that seems obvious to us. But Mark doesn't think his gospel is just a historical account nor a theological textbook.

It isn't just journalism. This is the good news of the Son of God. It's all about him to fix our eyes on him. But who is this man? And Mark's going to take this whole gospel to answer that question.

[17:51] But for now, four points that act as trailers for the rest of the gospel. Mark already started telling us that Jesus is both the Christ and the Son of God, two titles that are going to act as guideposts for the story.

We'll hear one in the middle and one at the very end. Christ just means promised king, the one who God sent to rule over his people forever, the one who would bring about a rule of true righteousness and peace worldwide.

And halfway through this gospel, one of his disciples would be the first to say, you are the Christ. A huge turning point. But when we get to the Son of God, well, we need to go a little further.

So our first subheading there, Jesus is God's beloved Son. Jesus appears on the scene almost as rapidly as John in verse 9.

in those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Notice in comparison, if you've read any of the other gospels, no birth narrative, no Christmas, no genealogy.

[19:03] Nazareth is just not an important place. Jesus' credentials aren't laid out in his history, but in these events right here. As Jesus is baptized, he comes up out of the water and sees the very heavens themselves torn open, and the voice of God says, you are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased.

My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. We've already had the first prophet in 400 years, and all of a sudden, God himself is speaking directly, revealing through Mark's gospel to us that Jesus is the very Son of God, the one whom he loves, and the one whom he is pleased with.

Those are words that he will repeat later in this gospel again. And even those statements in verse 11 hark back to things that God has said in the Old Testament. God is actually quoting himself.

Isn't that fascinating? He can just refer to his own words in history. God is quoting partially from Psalm 2 about the one he would appoint to be the king over the universe, his own son in history.

And also pointing to the one from Isaiah who would be the suffering servant who was fully obedient to God's command and work. God is pleasing to God.

[20:36] That's his job. But isn't it amazing to think that the ones who were described as God's son before, Israel, the nation before him, he was not pleased with?

The first two thirds of our Bible is essentially a huge story of God not being pleased with his people and yet loving them. you might sit and think, I often don't think God is very pleased with me.

Friends, what of it? He is pleased with his son. Here is the one who God looks at and says, I am pleased with him. His work is right and good.

great. And he is the one who is going to stand in our place, says Mark. Because Jesus is the only son of the eternal God, the perfect one who will perfectly do God's work.

And secondly, he is the one in whom the spirit of God is poured out. John said of Jesus, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And at his baptism, Jesus sees the spirit descend on him and we mustn't miss the astonishing moment of fulfillment here.

[21:51] The son is baptized, the spirit descends and the father speaks, the trinity has appeared. The whole trinity is here. God has arrived in full.

And the pouring out of the spirit is something that Isaiah said would happen to that promised king who Israel had been waiting for. The spirit be poured out on him so that he might do God's work and rule perfectly because Jesus is again the Christ, the son of God.

Now you might ask, what use does the son of God have for a baptism? He is perfect, he does not need purified, he doesn't need to be forgiven, he has no sin.

So why is Jesus getting baptized? Well think about Jesus' baptism. thousands and thousands and thousands of people from all of Israel all coming and Jesus is joining in, identifying with his people as one of them.

He hasn't taken on flesh by accident or because it's less scary, he's taken on flesh to be with his people. He's identifying with humanity, with us.

[23 : 07] as he participates in a baptism, so one day all who believe in him will participate in him, be baptized into him under his name.

As Lewis was this morning baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit because he has come to us so that we could be with him. This baptism shows that Jesus is the son of God, equipped with the Spirit of God to do the work of God.

He is everything we need. And thus where does the Spirit take him? Well, immediately out into the wilderness to do battle with Satan. God's son takes the fight to God's adversary, our ancient enemy, Satan himself.

Now, Mark is a gospel in which Satan will be hugely active. The activity of demons and evil spirits is rife in this gospel. Every other page someone is possessed under oppression of a demonic spirit in some way and we will see so much of that ramped up as Jesus comes in.

Even here we get a sense of the opposition to Jesus. He's in the wilderness with the wild animals. Friends, if you're thinking, oh, isn't it nice he's with the gophers and the rodents, he's not.

[24 : 31] He's with lions and dangerous creatures that tear people apart. The wilderness is a terrifying place and yet Jesus is out there. But being ministered to by the angels as the Father by the Spirit protects his son to do the ministry's cold and tea.

But notice again how long he's in the wilderness, 40 days. Come next week on Sunday morning you're going to hear JT preach of how badly Israel fail their 40 day test in the wilderness.

But where Israel, God's son, fails, Jesus, God's son, succeeds. He doesn't compromise. There is no sin in him.

And this again is huge news from Genesis 3 all the way through the Old Testament. Satan, humanity's great enemy, has been causing people to compromise and sin and driving people away from God.

And yet God promised that one day one would come who would crush and defeat Satan forever and in this very story we see the beginning of Satan's end.

[25 : 45] Because if you're thinking well who wins the fight in verses 12 and 13, look who in verse 14 goes out preaching. It's not Satan, he's not one.

Satan's defeat is writ large over his inability to make Jesus sin. A defeat that will be sealed by Jesus' death and finished on the final day when Jesus comes again to remove all evil forever.

As I said, this is just the trailer. But there will be a day when Jesus finally brings Satan under judgment. But until then, Jesus will be proclaiming the kingdom and this is our very final point. Jesus comes proclaiming the kingdom. Verse 14, now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God.

I find when I read that, I just flinch a bit. Now after John was arrested, hold on. The messenger in the wilderness that had been prophesied for hundreds of years that we've all been waiting for, the great hope pointing to Christ is arrested and imprisoned, that feels entirely off.

[27 : 01] Well, it's another trailer for a much darker episode coming up in chapter 6 later. It tells us this message is going to be opposed. This isn't going to be Jesus walking straight into Jerusalem, crowning himself as king and saying, I'm here, bow to me.

It's not what Jesus' kingship is going to be like. Jesus' message goes beyond John's here. God's message of salvation, the good news of forgiveness from sins through Jesus, his grand plan to bring a purified people to himself, that gospel, here in verse 15 is Jesus' first words to humanity in Mark's gospel.

He says three things I want us to just focus on here. First, the time is fulfilled. As God's people have been waiting, Jesus stepped onto the pages of human history into humanity's timeline.

God's plan unfolds exactly when he meant it to. Jesus says, the kingdom of God is at hand. From the ashes and wreckage of Israel's kingship in history comes a perfect king coming to rule a perfect kingdom forever.

Proclaimed by himself, Jesus, the king, the son of God. God. And Jesus' message for all who hear is repent and believe the gospel.

[28:31] Jesus calls all who hear to turn from their sin and to him, to believe in him and his work. And Mark is calling us through this record to repent from our sin and believe in Christ.

Christ. Because Jesus is the Christ, the son of God. And so very simply in conclusion to this very rapid introduction to Mark's gospel, we just need to know that Jesus is the good news.

Want to know what the gospel is? Go see Jesus Christ. Jesus is the good news. He's what we need to hear. And that will upend so many things in our lives.

Because if we're honest, there are so many other things we actually really believe are the good news. Society is going to tell you that being your best possible self is the good news.

That making enough money to get by and to get the lifestyle you aspire to, that's the good news.

That social and political change are the good news. That the middle-class Scottish dream is the good news.

[29:41] Friends, none of those things are the good news. In some ways, they're fine things, but none of them can do for you what Jesus can.

Social change can't save a soul. Being the very best you can be will not bring you forgiveness or change you. But Jesus can.

Jesus is the good news you need. And that's why this gospel is all about him. That's why all of our services are about him. That's why if you come to any of the services of Mark's gospel, you're just going to hear about Christ every time.

Because with Christ we can be forgiven of our sin. With Jesus we can receive the spirit of God himself. With Jesus we can find eternal life and rest for our souls.

Because through Jesus the God of the universe calls us home to be with him. This is just the beginning. But the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God is everything we need.

[30:52] Let's pray. Father we thank you that John appeared in the wilderness proclaiming the good news.

The repentance and forgiveness was possible and then Jesus came to us that we might be forgiven and know you. Father help us to see him.

To see the one who would come and defeat Satan and evil to see the one who would come and bring forth a perfect kingdom. All your people forgiven and united in him.

Help us to see him and where our hearts are cold to him warm us up. And for any who don't yet know him Lord reveal yourself by your mercy that all may see Christ and worship you.

Amen.