

At last! The waiting is over

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[0 : 00] The reading is from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 1, beginning at verse 1, and you can find this at page 1008 of the Church Bibles.

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's hair and wore a leather belt round 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.

[1 : 29] I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. In those days Jesus came 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 forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

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.

[2 : 40] Repent and believe in the gospel. Good morning everyone, and if you'd like to keep that open in front of you, we'll open it up.

We'll be looking at that passage. We have the exciting prospect of walking through Mark's gospel in the coming weeks. And we're going to get as far as we can through it in the year.

So that's the plan. Of course, in this gospel account, this eyewitness account, here, like nowhere else, we come face to face with the Son of God, as he really is.

I was reading an account over the summer of an Australian sergeant in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in the Second World War as they were building the bridge over the River Kwai, famously.

And he, I mean, the men were dying like, dropping like flies. The conditions were awful.

[3 : 50] All of the men were dying. And he came to a Scottish man called Ernest Gordon, I think, who himself wasn't a Christian, but they knew that he had a Bible.

And they knew he was an educated man. So this Australian sergeant, who didn't, who'd never met this guy before, but came to him and said, look, my men are asking if you would teach us what the Bible says.

And it was a lovely request because the way that his men had put it is, they'd said, we don't want the Sunday school stuff. We want the real thing.

No waffling, which was the gentle art of avoiding the facts. You can imagine these men as they faced death. They wanted to know what Jesus really did and what he really taught.

And how could this have anything to do with their lives? Well, I hope it, I guess there'll be some people here today who were looking into the Christian faith. And you are so welcome with us.

[5 : 03] And that's going to be one of the things we're going to be doing over the coming weeks. Please come along. Please join us regularly as we look at the real Jesus. So often we've heard of Jesus second hand or third hand through various ways.

Well, this is a chance to come and look at the real Jesus. There may be some here with just really fundamental questions like, does God exist? If he exists, what's he like? Is history going anywhere? Is the world just spinning round and round? Is there hope of life beyond or are we consigned to endure and die?

When we die, we rot, as one person has put it. Is there more than just what we can see? Is this it? Is Christianity really true?

What about all the other religions? What about suffering? All of these questions find their answer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[6 : 07] For those of us who have been walking with Jesus for many years, and I know that's many of us here, we wish we could see him more clearly.

Don't you? Don't you wish you could see him more clearly and love him more and trust him more?

Well, as we come back to a gospel, what an opportunity for that.

Others of us who are Christians but just feel like we're just about hanging in there. Life is really tough and sometimes wondering, why am I doing this again?

Come back to a gospel. Come back to the Lord Jesus. So that's where we're going to be and I think it's a very exciting prospect. And you'll see the central claim of Mark's gospel is very helpfully laid out for us in verse 1.

This is the title of his book. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That word Christ is not his surname but it is a title.

[7 : 21] Christ, the Greek word for Messiah, which is the Hebrew word which means anointed one. In the Old Testament, God had promised that one day he would send an anointed one.

This anointed one would be a king. He would be a king who would live forever and would rule forever over the kingdom of God.

He would bring justice. He would bring peace. He would save people from sin and from death. He would bring people back into relationship with God forever, this anointed one.

He would stand as the Lord and judge of the universe, this anointed king. And so when Mark says this is the gospel about Jesus Christ, he is making the claim that Jesus, the man of history, is that promised anointed king.

The saviour of God's people, the Lord over all time. Now that is not a small deal.

[8 : 47] That is a big deal. That is not news that will affect some people if they choose, if they feel they need a crutch. That is news that if true, will affect all people forever.

That word gospel in the first verse means two things. It means good news. So as one person put it very helpfully, if you read through to the end of Mark's gospel and you don't think it's the best news you've ever heard, then you haven't understood it and you need to go back and read it again.

But it also means, gospel means momentous news, massive news. It means regime change. As someone put it, that telegram in 1918, hostilities have ceased.

That was gospel because it was momentous news. Good news, massive news. News that will affect everybody.

So that's the title. That's the claim. What's the rest of it? The rest of his book is all about backing up that claim, giving evidence for it.

[10 : 10] There is evidence, Mark says, let me show you. And secondly, to show us what kind of king Jesus is, why his rule is such good news for those who would accept him.

The rest of the gospel is to defend that claim and to define that claim. Very simple, actually. Mark is setting himself to defend it, to define it.

And so in these first 15 verses, he sets to work. This is the introduction. And this is about the way Jesus arrived. And Mark's point, I think, is very, very simple, which is to say that Jesus arrived in exactly the way that God promised that his Messiah would arrive.

And so therefore, the long wait is over. The warm-up acts are finished. The one who we've been waiting for has walked out, finally, onto the stage of history.

Just look at verse 9. In those days, Jesus came. Mark is claiming that is the moment when the one who we've been waiting for finally has walked out onto the stage.

[11 : 26] There are two things about the way he arrived that we're just going to pause on that I think Mark highlights. Number one, the promised messenger announced him. Number two, the promised spirit anointed him.

Now, for this, we're going to need to do just a little bit of hard work and come back into the Old Testament. So if you turn back to Isaiah, which is page 7, 2, 4, I just want to show us this. Isaiah chapter 40. I think it's on page 7, 2, 4 of your church Bibles.

Now, just look down with me. Isaiah 40, verse 3. A voice cries, in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, every mountain and hill made low. The uneven ground shall become level and the rough places are plain.

[12:32] And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. Now, this is a promise. Can you see in verse 3 that God himself would come to earth, make straight a highway for our God.

God is coming, God says. I am coming to save. But do you see there, verse 3, a voice cries. there was going to be a herald, a messenger who would proclaim and prepare the way for God.

God promised. Do you see that? Make way, might make way. Of course there was if God is coming. He would roll out the red carpet, a messenger who would proclaim.

I guess in modern terms you'd get the police escort going before, wouldn't you? But back in those days there would be the herald. God says, I will send a herald, a messenger before I arrive.

Now, while we're here, just flip with me to chapter 42, a couple of pages forwards, because I want to show us the second thing. because God also promised that when his Messiah came, he would place his spirit upon him.

[13:59] Do you see that? 42, verse 1, behold my servant, my Messiah, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.

I have put my spirit upon him. he will bring forth justice to the nations. Two things.

There will be a messenger and I will put my spirit upon my Messiah. That's the one. You'll know him because I've put my spirit on him.

Now, flick back to Mark with me. Can you see what Mark is doing here? It's very simple, really. He's saying the messenger has come and announced and the spirit, the promised spirit has anointed.

So firstly, his first point is verses 2 to 8. The promised messenger has come. And look at verse 4, how he highlights where John the Baptist did his ministry.

[15:08] Do you see that, verse 4? Baptizing in the wilderness. Where was this voice going to cry? Verse 3, in the wilderness. That was the promise.

And look how he highlights what John did. Verse 4, he was a proclaimer. He proclaimed. And then verse 7, he preached.

What was this messenger going to be? Oh, verse 3, he was going to be a voice. Proclaiming, preaching, preparing that way. And so Mark is saying, John the Baptist was the messenger.

Promised long ago. Andy Meadows, who was up earlier, he mentioned earlier in the week, he says, it makes you think of the A-team. Or at least, it made him think of the A-team.

I think it's probably quite a narrow cultural reference. Some of us might remember the A-team. And there was a character in that who said again and again, I think probably almost every episode, I love it when a plan comes together.

[16:16] You can actually go onto YouTube and find a two-minute video of just a montage back-to-back of his saying that, which I actually watched from start to finish.

I love it when a plan comes together. Well, that is Mark's point here. God's plan, the promises are coming true right before our eyes.

the messenger has come. Now, you'll see that John prepared the way for the Messiah in two ways. Verses 4 and 5, he prepared for his work that he would be a savior. Verses 6 to 8, he prepared for his identity that he would be Lord.

Do you see that? Verses 4 and 5, John preached about the heart of his work of salvation. What would this Messiah be bringing? Verse 4, repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[17:21] That is reconciliation with God. Do you see what's happening in verse 4? Is that as John baptized with water in the river Jordan, so he proclaimed a better baptism that was about to come, pictured by the water, but not the water.

That is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A far greater baptism, a spiritual washing, a spiritual fresh start, spiritual new life, pictured by the water.

in other words, John said, the forgiveness of sins is about to become available for all who would turn back to God.

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There is no greater news than that, there is no greater salvation than that. Sin, that wretched barrier between us and God since the very beginning. Sin that could not be removed by man or by the law or by animal sacrifice or by temple religion. Sin that would be removed once and for all, John said, by this Messiah.

[18 : 41] The forgiveness of sins is about to become available for all who would turn to God, John said. And there we have the heart of the work of Jesus.

John prepared the people for the heart of his work, the forgiveness of sins. Get ready, John said, for a great saviour who will open the way back to God forever.

I wonder if there's anyone who particularly needs to hear that afresh or for the first time today. Jesus can bring you back to God forever and to forgive all of your sins, past, present and future. John said, get ready for that saviour. But he also said, get ready for a great Lord. Verses 6 to 9, he wore camel's hair, we'll come back to that in a second, a leather belt round his waist and eight locusts.

I don't know if anyone's planning that for lunch. We're going round actually to someone's house for lunch so it may be that locusts are on the menu but we'll see. And Wild Honey, 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.

[19 : 59] I have baptised you with water but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. John the Baptist himself was a great prophet. I think that's the point of the clothing in verse 6, why Mark mentions that.

He doesn't mention the clothing of many other people in his gospel, doesn't tell us what Peter was wearing at any stage I don't think. He mentions the clothing of John, why? Because John was dressed like Elijah, exactly like Elijah who wore a hair shirt and a leather belt.

Elijah was considered to be one of if not the greatest prophet. In fact Jesus elsewhere refers to John as the greatest among men. men. When you look at John the Baptist's ministry and you think about it, which other prophet compares?

The whole southern kingdom, if you know your Old Testament, coming out and confessing their sins. He was the greatest prophet.

But here's the point. John did not consider himself worthy to stand in the presence of this one who is to come. More than that, John did not consider himself worthy to stoop down.

[21 : 21] You see that? Not only not to stand, I'm not worthy to stoop down in his presence or even to touch him or even to touch his sandals.

The point is the greatest prophet is saying this. I'm not worthy to be in his presence as even the lowliest servant.

Well, if that's the case, who exactly is Jesus? And what kind of Lord is he? And that is the point, of course.

John the Baptist knew that he was preparing the people to meet the Lord, the creator God in human form. Jesus is a very, very big deal.

And yes, John prepared them back then for him. But the impact on us readers is the same. That is that Mark through John is saying to us as we read this, get ready as you read on to meet a very great saviour and a very, very great Lord, in whose presence we are not worthy to stand.

[22 : 41] Can I ask, where is Jesus in your life? What position is he in? Is he where he should be? Are his words where they should be?

he in God is I just want to pause here for a second before we move on. It's a slight excursion, but I do think it's important because so many have questions about the truthfulness of these accounts. Can we believe them? Did they make them up? I just want us to note here that it was not possible for Mark to have made this up. Mark is talking about an unmissable national event.

all Jerusalem and Judea went out to him. Do you see that verse 5? There's nothing comparable in our recent history unless I'm not aware of it of the whole of London going out to somewhere in Kent which is the equivalent of our wilderness to a river in Kent along with the rest of the southeast to be baptized.

Perhaps the closest we have is people going to the polls in general elections although voter turnout is down from 83% in 1950 to only 60% so that doesn't cut it.

[23 : 59] You see Mark was writing 30 years after the event. There's no way he could have begun his account like this and have gained any traction and been taken seriously at all if these events

had not happened.

Not only that it would have been impossible for him to change anything that John had said or anything that John did. It would be like me trying to persuade you now that Lymford Christie was a Russian ballet dancer or that Churchill played the bass for Queen.

I wouldn't get anywhere with that. You know, we have therefore the historical facts and it's very hard to dodge this no matter how skeptical we are.

Will you engage with this? What other kind of explanation could there be? What kind of engineering would have been necessary for somebody trying to make this up? How can you get a whole nation to go out to a prophet in the desert confessing their sins?

And then for that prophet to proclaim the arrival of someone greater than themselves just before the greatest most compelling man who ever lived? Well the answer is that it's not engineered by man but it is and can only be the hand of God at work in history to fulfill his promises and prepare the way for his Messiah just as he said he would.

[25 : 31] Well secondly and more briefly the promised spirit anointed him and just look at verse 9 to 11 in those days Jesus came 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 as we saw God had said that the Messiah that the anointed one would be the one on whom he put his spirit he is the one when you see that God had said he is the one who will come and rule over eternity and bring justice and peace forever notice he tears the heavens he tears the sky there's no other event like this in the Bible where the fabric of the universe is literally torn and the spirit comes down from heaven and rests on

Jesus and a voice booms from heaven in the hearing of those around we take it you are my beloved son with you I am well pleased King Charles was anointed by Justin Welby behind a curtain in a fairly impressive building in London on national TV that was an anointing I guess fit for a king who would rule briefly over an island somewhere in the North Atlantic this is an anointing fit for the eternal son of God the king over God's eternal kingdom I will rip open the sky I will send down my spirit we often hear it said that I'll believe in God if he were to write something in the sky you know Jesus is the sun written in the clouds of course we wouldn't believe it even if we did see that well if we have eyes to see it he has done better than that he has torn open the sky and spoken audibly from heaven this one is my son just as he promised he would

I think it's worth asking isn't it could God have done more to pave the way for his son's arrival so that we might believe it if we have eyes to see it God has announced his son with a loud speaker will we resist him if so it is our hard hearts and closed minded refusal to accept the evidence that he's given us well God's long promised everlasting king has arrived bringing God's promised eternal kingdom one implication as I close and that's in verse 15 just look down with me I think this is the big implication therefore God's king has arrived Jesus goes and pronounces and proclaims the time is fulfilled the kingdom of God is at hand repent and believe in the gospel and so the implication I just want to pause on this as we close do you see there we're not at the beginning of the story we're at the end of the story you see that in what Jesus says the time is fulfilled the waiting is over the time is the promises are coming true that's the point the time is fulfilled the kingdom of God is at hand it's near Jesus arrival is not the beginning but it's the final chapter of God's redemption plan that's what Jesus goes out and starts to proclaim the final establishing of God's rule forever is near it is just around the corner the king has come the kingdom is near we're in the last pages of history and that is why there is an urgency now do you see that because the end of the story is near there is an urgency there is an urgent response for all people we must repent and believe that is what this news demands to turn back to

God before it's too late well I think all of this should make us want to sit up and listen Mark leaves us on I think the biggest cliffhanger in the history of literature God has come to earth what will he do what will he be like well that's where we're going to be in the next few weeks let me pray father we thank you for giving us so much evidence that you have sent your son to earth and anointed him as king thank you that the king has come and the kingdom is near thank you that this is good news that all who have turned to Christ already have the forgiveness of sins reconciliation with you forever thank you that this is momentous news that it will impact everyone one way or the other father we pray that you would let this sink into our hearts give us an urgency as well we pray for those around us we go on praying for this city and for those in

[31 : 59] Dulwich that many more would come and see who Jesus is and turn around and find the forgiveness of sins in him and we ask all of these things in his name amen and you and to