

Mark 1:1-15

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to start a series on the book of Mark. So, if you would open your Bibles and turn to Mark chapter 1, verses 8, 3, 7.

The shortest, fastest, most action-packed, earliest gospel of them all. Our best evidence was that Mark was a close associate of the Apostle Peter, and he wrote down what Peter said, which means we move very close to the person of Jesus.

And as I've been reading and praying and preparing, I have found Mark does not let you stand back as a spectator. He just doesn't allow you to do it.

He goes and brings you in as a participant, and we'll see that much more from next week onward. And I'm praying that that will happen for all of us as we rediscover the wonder of who Jesus is, or maybe discover it for the very first time.

The real Jesus of power and compassion. And I want to invite you to pray as we come to church. You might be driving.

[1 : 1 4] You might have someone else driving. Just pray aloud in the car. I know if you've got kids in the car, that might not work. But pray that God would open your heart and the hearts of those around you, that we would be more delighted in him and more devoted to him week by week.

Because Mark is mesmerized by Jesus. Every paragraph is about Jesus. Jesus is the consuming preoccupation of this book.

And that's why he starts the way he does. Look at the first verse. He goes right into it. Wastes no time. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As far as we know, there is no other book of this kind that has ever been tried before in human history. I mean, how do you describe what is completely indescribable?

How do you describe the coming of God into human history? The most significant event. It's not just one of the events on that line. This is the biggest event on the line.

[2 : 2 0] I mean, how do you convey that sense of sheer overwhelming wonder that everyone who followed Jesus had? And what he does is he begins by saying, I am writing the gospel, the gospel.

There were lots of gospels in the Roman Empire. Lots of things that people proclaimed. Lots of announcements that people thought were important. But this is not any of those. This is the singular one good news from heaven, the gospel.

And you know, when Mark wrote it, there was such disillusionment and a disappointment with these good news announcements and the rulers and the leaders of the day.

And there's the same sort of cynicism today. And the gospel comes to us afresh. It's not a morality code. It's not a set of truths to believe.

It's a person. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus, who is the Christ. That's a title. The Messiah, the anointed King, through whom God is going to establish the eternal kingdom with the perfect King.

- [3 : 27] And God's very Son, through whom God will reveal himself through action, the one who brings us to God. So what should we expect as we come to Mark's gospel?
- I mean, if it's God breaking into the world, how should we get ready? And I'm only going to look at verses 2 to 13. And it's a kind of an introduction or an orientation to the whole gospel.
- But the more you look at it, it's not an orientation. It's a disorientation. What I mean by that is it's not full of action of Jesus doing things.
- In fact, Jesus doesn't even appear until verse 9. But Mark deliberately is trying to put us off balance. And he does it through a series of voices.
- First, the voice of God in the Old Testament through Isaiah. Then the voice of John the Baptist. Then the voice of God speaking audibly at Jesus' baptism. And this section is unlike anything else in all the gospel.
- [4 : 30] Because Mark wants to make us ready for what is truly momentous. And I've got two points because I think Mark makes two main points here. The first is the identity of Jesus.
- And the second is the identification of Jesus. Both headings are borrowed from someone. So, number one, the identity of Jesus. And this is verses 2 to 8. I don't know about you, but I have found verses 2 to 3 quite bewildering as a start to the gospel.
- Just think about it. We hear a transcendent voice off stage. Not speaking to us, but speaking to Jesus.
- It's the voice of God himself through the words of the prophet Isaiah. There's nothing like this in the rest of the New Testament. Behold, he quotes, 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. And as a leader read it for us, we know this is the prophecy of the great day of visitation of God into the world where the mountains will be crushed down and the valleys will be lifted up.
- [5 : 38] When God comes to gather in his lambs in his arms and hold them to his bosom and defeat all those that stand against the people of God and to rescue them. And just so we know what is happening, Isaiah prophesies that a voice is going to appear in the wilderness.
- But what is extraordinary about this is that in Isaiah when it says prepare the way of the Lord, it refers to God himself.
- And Mark takes this and applies it straight to Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Lord, the God of the Old Testament. Jesus is God. Verse 2, verse 3.
- The way of the Lord is the coming of God himself. That is what Mark is teaching us to expect. That the way of Jesus will be the full manifestation of God.
- That Jesus' way is God's way. That Jesus' work is God's work. That Jesus' person is God's person. And he's come to bring the saving power and the saving grace of God.
- [6 : 44] And the gospel is therefore a way. It's not a belief system. It's not a, you know, magical, mystical, metaphysical meditation.
- It's a practical path. It's a way. And it leads to the cross and the resurrection. And Jesus will teach this way and he will walk it out. This is very important, John the Baptist here.
- God is not playing around. John the Baptist comes in the next verse preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- How we step into the way of God is through repenting from sin. Which is a complete turning of our lives. And we turn away from everything that separates us from God.

And to accept him and all that he does. And all that he says. And this is exactly what Jesus preaches in verse 15. Repent and believe in the gospel.

[7 : 45] And it's not something you just do at the beginning of your Christian life. This is a daily, hourly, maybe spiritually healthy discipline. And brothers and sisters, as we come to begin Mark's gospel, we've got to ask ourselves.

Is repentance part of our daily life? How are we preparing for God? I mean, just think about this. Am I resisting God in any area of my life? Am I saying to him, hands off?

You know, is there anything or anyone that would keep me away from God? Repentance means turning our backs and moving toward him. Wherever you say I must go, I will go. Whatever you say has to be done, Lord, I will do.

And how can that possibly be worth it? Well, the simple answer, again, is the identity of Jesus. Look at verse 7. This is what John says. After me comes one who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I have baptized you with water. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. So, here is the first direct speech in Mark. And John points his fingers straight toward Jesus Christ.

[8 : 52] And he calls him the mighty one. The strong one. The strongest one. Which is exactly what Jesus calls himself in chapter 3. As he describes how he's come to destroy the power of Satan and death and evil.

I am the strong man. I've come to rescue everyone imprisoned by Satan to free everyone taken. He is strong enough to deliver every one of us from every supernatural power and evil, which are too strong for us.

And he wants us to understand, John the Baptist, something of the nature and stature of Jesus. And he takes the most grubby and groveling practice there is, things even slaves refuse to do, and that is to take off their master's sandals.

And it's interesting how the commentaries dwell on this. I won't give you any of the details, but no, it was bad. No one is expected to do it. So, here is the most popular preacher for the couple of hundred of years in Israel.

And he says, It's great, isn't it?

[10 : 09] I mean, there's wonderful realism in John the Baptist. Despite the fact that all Judea and all Jerusalem and all the countryside were going out to hear him, despite the power and effectiveness of his ministry, he says this, All I can do is splash some water on your outsides.

I can't do anything to change your hearts. I can't wash you. I can't cleanse you. I can't transform you. He says he can. He will. In fact, he will immerse you and baptize you in the Holy Spirit.

And that's the basis of all our Christian ministry and serving. That's why they're having Count Me In today. That's why all the conversations and groups and serving of one another, it's because Christ alone gives spiritual life.

Christ alone is the one who gives us forgiveness and grace. We go to him for spiritual life and renewal, for hope and for love and for truth.

Because of his identity, this is who Jesus is. And that's the first point. So we turn, secondly, from the identity of Jesus to the identification of Jesus.

[11 : 19] Verses 9 to 13. We had a marked day yesterday and we had great fun. And one of the funnest parts of it was bribery. I had a number of Starbucks cards that I gave out in return for answering questions.

And I have none today. I'm sorry. However, let's go to the second point. The identification of Jesus. Verses 9 to 13. Now, we're expecting great things from this Jesus, aren't we?

That he's going to come in majesty and power. But when he appears, verse 9, it's a bit of an anticlimax. In those days, Jesus came, not from heaven, but from Nazareth in Galilee, to be baptized by John in the Jordan.

I mean, Nazareth in Galilee? And to be baptized? It just seems wrong, doesn't it? I mean, is he God in the flesh or not? Is he the strong man from heaven?

Has he come to defeat the enemies of God's people? Why on earth does he need to be baptized? He has no sin to repent of, right? Well, it's here we begin to see how God in Jesus Christ is going to triumph over evil.

[12 : 27] And he's going to do it by identifying with us. Jesus is the only human in history who does not need to repent. But the way he's going to overturn sin and death is to enter into it on our behalf and to deal with it once for all.

And he does that by identifying with us so that he can stand in our place. He's not going to enter glory by bulldozing those who stand against him.

He's come to suffer, to be bulldozed, if you will. To do what we fail to do. And he's going to do it for us in our place. He's not a saviour who stands above and just yells down and gives advice on what we should do.

He's utterly and totally committed and involved. It's wonderful. His baptism is not for his sins but for ours. And he turns his back on sins.

Not his but ours for us. And he identifies so closely with us that all of us who trust in him can be completely secure in the fact because we are saved by him.

[13 : 41] He has stood in our place and he has served us. So Jesus has come to identify with us completely and utterly. He's come to represent us against sin.

He will defeat death by death on the cross. He will be submerged in our place. He will take everything that stands between us and God and bring us to God.

And as Jesus comes up out of the water, now we begin to have some action. Three things happen. The heavens are torn open. The Holy Spirit descends.

God the Father speaks. God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all involved together in our salvation. And these three things take us deeper into what Jesus' identification means.

Let me just mention the three quickly. The heavens are torn open from top to bottom. It's a violent word. And this is what was prophesied in the Old Testament with the coming of the Lord.

[14 : 40] Rend the heavens and come down, O Lord. And the word is used only one other place in Mark's Gospel. It's the moment Jesus dies on the cross and the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom.

The temple that kept people out of the holy place, the holy of holies. Is supernaturally torn from top to bottom. As God says, through the cross of Jesus Christ, now there's nothing to keep us out from entering into full fellowship with God.

And here the rending, the tearing of the heavens shows that Jesus is the point of connection between heaven and earth.

That he's the one who joins heaven and earth together. He's come from heaven to earth. And our salvation begins with what he is doing to break open the doors of heaven for us.

It's astonishing. And then the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove, secondly. Which is not actually what it says. In the original, Mark makes the connection between Jesus and the Spirit much closer.

[15 : 49] It's literally the Holy Spirit descends into Jesus like a dove. There is a complete unity and filling with all the authority of God.

So, we would expect Jesus to teach with the authority of God, right? To cast out demons with the authority of God. To have the authority of God to forgive sins.

And that's what we'll begin to see in the next weeks. The third thing that happens, which is the climax of all the three, is an audible voice, audible to Jesus, speaks from heaven.

Again, I just say it doesn't speak to you. It doesn't speak about us. It speaks to Jesus. And again, just like verses 2 and 3, the voice from heaven matches the voice from the Old Testament as he speaks directly to Jesus.

And he says, you are my beloved son. With you, I am well pleased. And we have the privilege here of overhearing God the Father affirming Jesus and the two sides of his identity and his mission.

[17:02] And who he is and what he's come to do. This is a loaded sentence. And God combines at least two Old Testament texts. And I want to just spend a moment explaining this because without this, I don't think we're going to understand the gospel.

Are you with me still? Okay. So, here are two texts that God brings together. The first is, you are my beloved son. Comes from Psalm 2.

And if you go back and look at Psalm 2, it is about the enthronement of Jesus Christ, the son of God, against the enemies of God in might and majesty. So, the nations are hostile to God.

They have the suicidal idea that rejecting his kingship will bring freedom. And in response, what God does is he sets up his son on the throne to defeat all who fight against God.

And the son will destroy all evil from creation. And the psalm finishes as God says, kiss the son, bow before him, lest he be angry with you and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled.

[18:08] So, this first part of the quote means we expect that Jesus is going to come with might and power and majesty in the army of God. And then we have the second part of the quote, which is almost the opposite.

He says, with you I am well pleased. This comes from Isaiah 42 and it is about, it's a very different picture. It's about the servant of the Lord who suffers and dies in the place of the people.

This servant doesn't look attractive, he's weak, he feels futile, but through him God is going to work his purposes through suffering and dying. And do you remember one of the servant songs?

He comes to bear our griefs, he comes to carry our sorrows, to be pierced for our transgressions, to be crushed for our iniquities.

All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way, but the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all.

[19:10] That is the servant of God. And we have to keep these two things together. Yes, he has all the authority of God, but what does he do with the authority of God?

He serves us by giving his life to pay for our sins. There it is. No human would ever come up with this. It had to be revealed from God.

And I just, coming to the end soon, but this is not there to warm our hearts up, though I think it does. It's to break open our categories. At the heart of the Christian faith is this God-man, Christ Jesus, dying for his enemies.

With all the power and majesty of God, loving his enemies and sacrificing himself for them. The way that God the Son defeats and conquers evil is by taking it upon himself.

And if we let that sink in for just a moment, it means we have the freedom to be weak as well. We don't have to win.

[20 : 18] We have the freedom to love those who don't deserve it because that's the way we've been loved. And it's the combination of these two almost contradictory things that is at the heart of Mark's gospel.

The all-powerful king, the defenseless sufferer. His identity and his identification with us. And this is the glory of the gospel. That Christ has come to defeat death by dying.

That our great and majestic king bows to enter our suffering and to suffer what we deserve. And to give us what we don't. Forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, eternal life in the kingdom of God comes through him.

This pattern of power and weakness, this pattern of power and suffering together, the serving and majesty together, I think is one of the reasons why people are so thankful for the life of Queen Elizabeth II.

I mean, she sought to and she followed Christ in her leadership. She had plenty of constitutional power, but it was never about herself. She tried to use it to serve her people.

[21 : 28] Jesus has far more power and he gives himself way more extravagantly and utterly than any other human ever has. Taking our guilt into himself, buying our freedom by his own shame and death.

And I think that's why verses 12 and 13 conclude our passage. There's no royal reception for Jesus. The Spirit literally casts him out in the wilderness to confront the enemy of God and humanity, Satan.

This is a genuine test for Jesus. Will you, Jesus, identify with us and stand in our place?

Satan can't do anything to change the identity of Jesus, but he'll do everything to deviate him from the will of God. And the test is this. Will Jesus freely choose to do God's will?

Because if he doesn't, he can't deliver us. He's come to destroy the devil and all his works and to liberate all those who are held captive to him. And so as I'm just preparing us, as we go through the gospel, every one of his miracles, every one of his healings, every one of his power over nature or cleansings, are offensives against the kingdom of darkness and evil, bringing life where there is death, health where there is sickness, freedom where there is slavery.

[22 : 55] So let me just conclude by saying two things. I love that line this morning on the Bible. It's a brilliant way to look at the Bible. Don't tell the children this.

Don't tell Will I said this. But actually the gospel has the second, the third last one, the coming of Jesus, as way higher than any of the others.

Because what God has done in Jesus Christ, the way the New Testament writers understand it, is in the great plan of salvation from eternity past to eternity future, the decisive act has already taken place in Jesus Christ.

That's what this passage is telling us. Yes, I know, the full enjoyment and consummation waits in the future. But the decisive victory over the enemies of God and his people.

The definitive deliverance has already taken place in Jesus Christ. And that's why the first thing he does after being baptized is he takes the battle to Satan.

[24 : 00] And I say this for our encouragement. Salvation is God's doing. It begins with him. It's the doing of God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

And so I'm encouraging you to learn, we need to learn how to rest our hearts on Christ. There's no one better qualified. There's no one who has more power. And there's no one who has more compassion.

And when we repent and place our trust in him, he's able to carry us through every darkness because he's been there and he's already defeated them. That's the first thing.

And the second thing is this. I think this is what we need post-COVID. I think most people and probably we as a church have a kind of a post-traumatic stress issue going on.

We've had to focus on ourselves for so long and our health and what we shouldn't do. And I think many of us sense a kind of a spiritual stuckness where we are.

[25 : 01] We need a fresh start from God. We need the Son of God who loves us and is willing to die for us so that we might enjoy the blessings of the gospel. And as we come and as we drink in what Jesus is saying and what Jesus does for us, this is the fresh start, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Amen.