

# The Beginning of the Gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! It says, 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. Verse 4, it says, 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 around his waist.

[ 1 : 29 ] 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.

I have baptized you with water. But he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

May God bless the reading and the preaching of his word. Every Star Wars movie starts in the exact same way.

The screen goes completely dark, lit only by the stars of the night sky. The famous words suddenly appear on the screen a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

And after that, at the exact same moments, the word Star Wars burst onto the screen in that iconic 1970s font. And the famous theme music fills the theater.

[ 2 : 41 ] I'm sure we could all hum it along together. And then, one of the most interesting things about the Star Wars films, a short introduction crawls across the screen, explaining what Luke and Leia and the rest of the gang are up to now.

What has happened to the Jedi's? What is the Galactic Empire trying to do? Where will the fight for peace and freedom resume?

You know, in so many ways, the introduction doesn't just signal the start of another Star Wars film. It situates us in it. Tells us what to watch for.

Tells us who to cheer for. It tells us who's on the side of good and who's on the side of evil. Without it, we would just be like anyone else in the story. Just like one of those ignorant stormtroopers.

Well, the opening verses to the Gospel of Mark are much in the same way. It's clear that verses 1 through 13 are to be understood as an introduction or a prologue.

[ 3 : 51 ] If you'll notice, these verses are situated in the wilderness near the Jordan River. There's references there in 3, crying out in the wilderness. In 4, baptizing in the wilderness.

In 5, all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out and being baptized by him by the river Jordan. Again, in verse 9, in those days, Jesus came into, came by John, or was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Again, in verse 12, the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. The location does not change until verse 14. So these verses are meant to be clustered together.

And these verses also contain a striking emphasis on the Holy Spirit. Three times he appears in these opening verses, but is only mentioned two more times in the rest of the Gospel.

But perhaps most importantly, aligning with our Star Wars illustration, these verses give us a unique perspective. They give us information unavailable to the characters of the story.

[ 4 : 52 ] Unavailable to Peter and John and Matthew. Just like the opening crawl of Star Wars, these verses give us off-screen perspective. Before the story begins, what the characters of the

story will only learn as they walk with Jesus for years, we learn and come to understand right here. These verses are the voice of the narrator. These verses are the voice of the Lord Himself. While they may not be as sweeping as the opening of John's Gospel, which Megan read for us a moment ago.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God, and the Word was with God. Actually, this does start with the beginning as well, just like Genesis does. They might not be as sweeping as John's Gospel.

So this introduction, nevertheless, gives us heaven's perspective of Jesus Christ. Before telling us the story, it gives us a divine perspective of who He is.

And so doing, in so many ways, they stir our anticipation and stoke our wonder again about what God has done in Christ. They take us behind the screen.

[ 6 : 01 ] Behind the scenes. To see the glory Jesus had from the beginning. They call us to humbly bow before Him. In a world where everyone rushes to share their opinion, Mark wants us to remain quiet and to bow humbly before Jesus Christ.

Where we're going in a word this morning is, There is one man before whom all men must bow, the Lord Jesus Christ. There is one man before whom all men must bow, the Lord Jesus Christ.

We're going to break this out very simply with three Ps, like a good alliterating preacher. The first one is the promise. The promise. You know, the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of a promise.

That's what these verses are meant to teach us. And if you didn't have a chance to listen to last week's message, I encourage you to do so. To help you understand why, or help you understand the uniqueness of Mark's gospel and why I think this book is just the book for us right now.

And one of the things I emphasized last week is what Mark is doing. He's trying to publish good news. So before the gospel was a type of book, which is what they are in our copy of the scriptures, these gospels, these types of books.

[ 7 : 13 ] The gospel was just news. It was news that was to be published throughout the empire, published to the galactic empire and out and beyond about what God has done in Jesus Christ.

It's official news from God. That's incredible, but I can't preach last week's message again, so I won't do that. But you see that right there at the beginning.

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But verse 1 is tied tightly to verse 2. If you look there, it says, as it is written in Isaiah, the prophet, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it is written. And that preposition never merely looks forward, but always looks backward to what came before.

Interestingly, this is the only time Mark tells us in his words that scripture is fulfilled in his gospel. Now, Matthew does that a whole lot. Fulfillment is a formula throughout Mark's gospel.

[ 8 : 13 ] So this is the only time here. So it's a very important one. Aside concluded. So what he's trying to say is, how does the good news begin? It begins with a promise of a prophet in the wilderness.

I love this. The good news doesn't begin with Jesus' birth. The good news, the idea, the dawning of this news, and this news that's going to turn the world upside down.

It wasn't done in a corner, as the apostle said, but was done out in broad daylight to turn the world upside down, began with the answer to a promise. So let's dig into this promise.

If you look in verse 2, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, it says, 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.

Now, this promise is credited right there, attributed to Isaiah, but it's actually a blend of three promises. Now, got to move a little bit close quickly here, but I want to point those out to you.

[ 9 : 13 ] If you look there with me on the screen, it says, from Exodus 23.20, you see the beginning of this is, I'll send my messenger before you to guard you on the way and bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Exodus 23.20, Malachi 3.1, Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. So you see those, behold, I'll send my messenger before you, who will prepare the way before me.

Prepare my way. And then, probably one you know, Isaiah 43, a voice cries, In the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, which is mentioned in Matthew and Luke as well.

So there's a wonderful blending of these three promises here. To say something very important. Time after time, the people of God were drawn into the wilderness to hear the promise that the Lord was coming and would deliver them.

That's what each of these promises have in common. Exodus 23 is saying, while the people were groaning and grumbling, as we know from numbers in the wilderness for 40 years, the Lord says, I'll send my messenger.

[10:24] He'll take you over the Jordan into the promised land. Exodus 23.20, after the exile, when they had been kicked off the land and assumed all bets were off, they weren't going back to the land.

In Isaiah 40, the Lord says, prepare the way. I will leave my people out of exile. I'll establish a highway for the people of God. In fact, in Isaiah 40, and we have this for you, He says, go up to a mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.

Same word at the beginning of our gospel. Herald of good news. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem. Herald of good news. Lift it up. Fear not. Say to the cities of Judah, behold your God. Behold, the Lord God comes with might and His arm rules for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him. So what Mark is saying is, I have good news for you.

The Lord is coming. These promises are about to be fulfilled. John is taking his post in the wilderness because God is coming. But interestingly, before we run out to announce to the world, Mark says, the one who is coming is not the Lord, Yahweh.

[11:41] The one who is coming is Jesus. This, one of the guys I read this week about this passage, David Garland, I think says it well. If you know the book of Isaiah, and particularly Isaiah 40 and beyond.

He says, Isaiah anticipated a majestic procession led by God Himself. Prepare the way of the Lord. Mark sees that God has turned that task over to Jesus.

Jesus' appearance reveals that John is not paving the way for the appearance of God, but for the appearance of Jesus Christ.

Now, I know we're, this is kind of, we all know this stuff, right? But this is incredible. What he's saying is, history is being made right now.

Now, tonight, for all the football fans out there, we have an opportunity to witness history again. Two of the greatest quarterbacks of all time are facing each other. Tom Brady and Drew Brees will go head to head.

[12:49] Is this the last time? We don't know, but history is taking place. In fact, one of the best memes this week going on about this is that all future competition between Tom Brady and Drew Brees should take place on the History Channel.

And the picture was of them with these patriarch-like beards ready to face off. And even Tom Brady retweeted it this week. And I thought that was so great. You know, in so many ways, that's what Mark's saying.

Mark is saying, history is happening. The Lord Jesus is coming. History is being made. The long-awaited Messiah from Isaiah is here. He's the child who was born, the son who was given, the wonderful counsel of the mighty God, the everlasting father, the prince of peace.

He's the suffering servant. He's the son of God. But this also means this history was planned long ago.

So, the good news did not begin when John came preaching in the wilderness.

[13:58] The good news did not even begin when Jesus said the kingdom of God at hand. The good news began in eternity past when God the Father and God the Son agreed to rescue a sinful people.

What we're seeing in real time that God has assigned the position of redeemer to Jesus Christ is a decision that was made in eternity.

Theologians call this the covenant of redemption. We know from John 17 that Jesus says that I was glorified with you. He says, glorify me with the glory I had before the foundation of the world.

And so we know that Jesus was one with God. In the beginning was God. In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. So He was distinct from God.

But He was also God. And so from all eternity He dwelt in glory with God. And then John 6 tells us, the Lord said, All that the Father has given to me I will raise up on the last day.

[15:04] Remember those precious promises. All who come to me I'll never cast out. All that the Father gives to me I will raise up. So the good news began in eternity past when God the Father gave God the Son a people to redeem.

And that's what it's telling us. We see this in real time. The one who's coming is not Yahweh. The one who's coming is Jesus Christ. But what we're seeing in real time is the plan of God unfolding for all time.

Now, I want to read a quote that is admittedly tedious. And so if you want to zone out, you can zone out for two minutes and we'll catch you back up.

But, you know, what happened? How did this? What happened? How was this planned in eternity past? And John Flavel, one of my favorite Puritans, he writes out what could be the dialogue between the Father and the Son in a reverent way.

And this is it. Look there with me. He says, My son, Here is a company of poor, miserable souls that have utterly undone themselves and now lie open to my justice.

[16:19] Justice demands satisfaction for them or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them. What shall be done for these souls?

The Son. Oh, my Father, such is my love too and pity for them that rather than they should perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their surety.

Bring in all their bills that I may see what they owe thee, what they owe you. Lord, bring them all in. I would rather choose to suffer thy wrath than they should suffer it.

Upon me, my Father. Upon me be all their debt. The Father. But my Son, if you, if thou undertake for them, you must reckon to pay the last night.

Even no abatements, no takebacks, no easing up of the punishment because of who you are. If I spare them, I will not spare thee. The Son.

[17:31] Content, Father, let it be so. Charge it all upon me. I am able to discharge it. And though it prove a kind of undoing to me, and though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures, yet I am content to undertake it.

That's what stands behind these verses. The plan of God was established before a moment of our lives.

And in the fullness of time, God unveiled his plan to all the world. So the good news began in eternity past when God the Son purposed to not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but to empty himself and bear the punishment of guilty sinners so that we might be raised up on the last day.

Point two. The prophet. The prophet. The prophet. The prophet. So the promise and then the prophet. The messenger who was promised to pave the way is John.

So that's very clear. I love the simplicity of Mark's gospel. If you look down in verse 4, he just says, John appeared. There's no story of Elizabeth and her barrenness and having a baby.

[18:48] There's no story of Zachariah going mute in the temple. There's no story of the baby leaping in the womb, which would be great for sanctity of human life Sunday. There's no story of that. No buildup. He just said, John appeared.

Almost as if John was like this angel that just suddenly erupted onto the scene. He just came to be. He was just there. He's the messenger.

That's what he's saying. It's very clear. So he said in verse 2 and 3, Prepare the way of the Lord. And he says, John appeared. He's the one. He's called to prepare the way.

And he is quite a sight. If you notice that. Look in verse 6. He said, Now John was clothed with camel hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. Probably what Gil wore back in college.

But wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. You know, every once in a while, Christians come up with these Jesus-centered diets. You know, what would WWJ eat?

[19:45] What would Jesus eat? You know, something like a Mediterranean diet. Or maybe the Daniel diet. Well, as far as I know, John the Baptist diet is yet to be used. So you could actually take this today and make money.

Locusts and wild honey. Honey, but why this kind of odd description of John's clothing and cuisine? Have you ever thought that?

I mean, I was reading that this week. It just suddenly inserted there. He was wearing camel's hair and eating locusts, you know? So, what he's trying to say is that John is not just a messenger of prayers away.

He's a prophet. So he's wearing what Elijah wore. What in Zechariah 12, other prophets wore in the camel's hair.

Now, the locust thing, I don't know if there's a biblical precedent for that. Maybe he's just into that. But, you know, the idea is, do you remember the story of Elijah? You remember how he was whisked up from heaven by the chariots of fire and he never died.

[ 20 : 52 ] And so the people of Israel thought he was coming back because he was the great prophet. And so they looked for him. And in fact, Malachi 4 says that Elijah will come again. And so, in so many ways, John is appearing.

Mark is telling us that John is that Elijah who was promised to come. And Jesus is very clear about this in Matthew 11.

I believe it. And we have it there for you. He says, what did you go out to the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind. What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing. Rhetorical question.

No. Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in king's houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet. Yes. That's right. I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, behold, I send my messenger before your face.

Remember that from verse 2? Who will prepare your way before you for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. If you're willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come. So that is Mark's way of telling us that John is that Elijah.

[ 21 : 54 ] That Elijah that comes before the great day of the Lord. That Elijah that announces the Lord's coming. So again, he's underlying that the Lord, the one who was promised to come, the Lord is the one who was prophesied to come.

The Lord is the Lord Jesus Christ. So John's a prophet. But what is he doing? And these verses are just vivid and great. Look down at verse 4. He appeared.

That was his erupting onto the scene, baptizing in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance. All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out and were being baptized. You see how active. You see all those gerunds. Those are active words trying to say that all this stuff is going on. There's an active party, active revival out there by the river Jordan.

And John is calling the people in the wilderness to repent and get ready for the Lord. What John is saying at this decisive moment is the only way forward is downward.

[ 22 : 49 ] The only way forward is downward. This is the first reference to baptism in the whole Bible. Technically, it did come in Matthew, but you know what I mean.

We celebrate baptism as an outward sign of what God has done for us in our hearts, making us brand new, forgiving us of sins and making us new. But this baptism is different. John, this baptism is a wake up baptism.

This baptism is a realize how you strayed from God baptism. This baptism. John is a true prophet here and is doing what all the prophets of old did, calling the people to be alarmed, not because of the enemies on the horizon, but because of the enemies within their own heart.

John just sounds just like Jeremiah when he says, Be appalled, O heavens, for my people have committed two evils. They have forsaken me, the fount of living water, and have hewn out for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that hold no water.

They've not just forsaken me. They've embraced something else beside me. And so they come out confessing their sins. That's what you see. It's a wake up baptism.

[ 24 : 03 ] So they come out confessing their sins. John has a message our culture needs to hear. The deepest problem of the world is not financial or social or political. The deepest problem of the world is and always will be moral.

We as a church are concerned about many other problems, but we will not be distracted from the most important problem, our sin and guilt before God. And so what John is doing is what we need to do in so many ways.

The only way for it is downward in humility and honesty before God. 2 Chronicles 7.14 says, If my people who are called by my name humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I'll hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and heal their land.

Now, I don't think it's wise to apply this verse to America as if God has a special promise to this land. But I do think humility and repentance is the only answer for Americans.

The only way forward is downward. The only way forward is humility and repentance. The only way forward is getting low and admitting how we have blown it and how we have made things worse.

[ 25 : 15 ] You know, in our culture, it's just foreign. It's never there. No one knows how to apologize. I remember several years ago, my wife and I were watching Ken Burns' documentary on the Vietnam War.

She's Vietnamese, and so we loved diving into that in such a contentious time in America. Reminds us of a time right now. But watching that, and there was this really jarring scene that we watched, and a lot of it was jarring, but one scene particularly broke me, and it was about the My Lai Massacre.

If you know anything about that, it's a really, really dark spot in American history because of the number of Vietnamese civilians killed and raped at this massacre.

I knew all about that massacre, and my wife and I were watching it, and they were interviewing this man. I haven't been able to find out what his name was, but he's kind of shaggy-headed.

He looked a little bit like John the Baptist, but he was talking about the My Lai Massacre. He was giving eyewitness testimony because he was there, and he said, you know what?

[ 26 : 27 ] I raped them. I raped them. I raped them. I killed them. Not in a remorseless way, but in a deeply humbling way.

I'm the man. I'm the man. It just gripped me.

The only healing, the only forward progress will happen when you and I are willing to do that.

Some of us, some of you, need to come clean this morning. Some of you have secret sins in the dark that you need to turn from.

Some of you have given too much time to reading the news and headlines and too little time to getting low before the Lord, and the Lord has cleared the way. I mean, the Lord is coming in Jesus Christ to clear the way so that you might get low.

[ 27 : 38 ] That's what it means. Every mountain will be raised up, or every valley will be raised up. Every mountain will be brought low because the Lord is clearing the way. The Lord is clearing the way for you to be brought low.

If you walk in the light as He is in the light, you have fellowship with God, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. But if you say you have no sin, you lie and do not practice the truth.

And so those two cluster together to invite us to come and humble ourselves. That's what our culture needs. That's what our world needs. That's what America needs. That's what our church needs.

We will not prosper in 10, 20, 30 years unless we're a people who can get low and stop blaming other people and bow before the Lord Jesus Christ.

Obviously, if you come to Him this morning, His arms are completely wide open. He invites you to come. If you believe in your heart and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

[ 28 : 43 ] You will be set free. He comes to set free the slave, as we just sung. The one who binds the strong man is Jesus Christ, who binds Satan himself, and He's the one who sets you free from His clutches.

And so come and receive the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thirdly, the path. The path. Mark continues and gives us a glimpse into John's preaching.

Look down there in verse 7. He says, And He preached. Matthew and Luke give us tons of His preaching.

John just gives us this. And He preached, saying, After me, come see who is mighty than I, strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

In so many ways, what John is saying right here is the Lord is doing a new thing. The Lord is doing a new thing. John is in the wilderness, and he's standing on the banks of the Jordan River, and the whole scene is loaded with Old Testament references.

[ 30 : 03 ] It's loaded with Old Testament, with things that point to the Old Testament. The Jordan River was a river the people longed to cross into the promised land. They made it, but they were kicked off the land, so they longed to cross the River Jordan.

Even the people of God used to sing about crossing the river, the final river of Jordan, into eternal life, into heaven itself. On Jordan's stormy gates, I stand.

And in the wilderness is where the Lord has come and delivered them, and now He's about to deliver them again in a way far greater than any deliverance they could imagine. That's what Isaiah 40 is making. Here, prepare the way of the Lord. The Lord is about to deliver His people fully and finally. That's why when you pass through the waters, you should not be afraid. When you go through the desert, you should not be afraid, because the Lord is leading you out. What is impossible with man will be made possible through the Lord Jesus Christ. That's the point of the valley being lifted up, and the mountains being made low. The rough, ground, flat, sinners will be able to run to God.

[ 31 : 06 ] John knows this well. And so, he knows he's called to preach and then get out of the way. He has a short cameo.

Verse 7, After me, he says, comes he who is mightier than I. You know, he doesn't want people to be confused. So, in that day, there was quite a bit of like a teacher, a rabbi, would have disciples, would have lackeys, would have interns following around or something like that.

And he doesn't want anybody to be confused. Just because Jesus comes after him does not mean that Jesus follows him. Follows him chronologically.

But not where it matters. Just because he comes after him doesn't mean he follows him. Then he continues.

There's a strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. And at first glance, that seems like just kind of a flattering thing to say. It's actually incredible.

[ 32 : 09 ] Everyone wore sandals in those days, right? Dusty sandals.

You know, that's kind of what happened when Jesus went to the Pharisee's house and they didn't show him proper hospitality. They didn't let him wash his feet. No one washed his feet. Improper for any guest.

Very improper for the Lord. And so teachers had these students that would follow them around and they would show their commitment by taking care of everyday tasks for the teacher.

Maybe fetching food or fetching water or taking care of accommodations and things like that. Much like disciples did on the night the Lord was betrayed when they went and got, took care of a place for them to enjoy the last supper.

But disciples were not allowed to unstrap their teacher's sandal. Because that was too low for a disciple to do.

[ 33 : 14 ] But John says, unstrapping the sandal is too high for him. So disciples in that day weren't allowed to unstrap the sandal because it was too low for them.

But John says, unstrapping the sandal is too high for him. He's unworthy to do it. He's unworthy to touch his sandal.

I mean, is that the way we think? Is our concern that we're thought too highly of or not highly enough? Jesus would, or John the Baptist would not fit in the 21st century church.

He would not have had a billboard for himself. He would not have published his sermon on JohnTheBaptist.com. He would not have jockeyed for position in Washington. He said, he must increase and I must decrease.

That's just incredible. I mean, we could take a whole sermon on that, you know. That's the call of every Christian. Usually we're great with the Lord increasing. As long as we increase a little bit too.

[ 34 : 09 ] But that's not what John said. But the whole point of it is John knew his place. John knew he was a pointer. That's all you and I are. He knew that he was the last one to announce that salvation was coming before salvation came in Jesus Christ.

He baptized with water and Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit. So John unveils that the path to be made right with God is being born again.

That's what's going on in this last verse. So there is this wonderful contrast between John and Jesus that runs through these verses and it's made explicit in verse 8. He says, I baptize you with water but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.

I baptize you with water he'll baptize you in the Holy Spirit. There's that wonderful contrast. John said, I can cleanse you externally. He can cleanse you internally. I can give you another try.

He can give you a new life. And so the gospel as it continues it becomes very clear. Jesus did not come to put new wine in old wineskin. He came to make all things new.

[ 35 : 14 ] He came to call us to be born again. That which is flesh is flesh. That which is spirit is spirit. That's the heart of the good news. Jesus did not come to give you good advice. He did not

