

GOOD NEWS FOR ANY YEAR

Mark 1

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This morning I invite you to consider with me the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Many of you have been involved in the daily study of this chapter this week. Others of you have been involved in small home Bible studies centering on this chapter. I will not read the chapter at this time, but rather make continual reference to it as we share together from the Scripture today.

If you were given the task of introducing Jesus Christ to the world through writing, how would you do it? What would you say?

Mark had that task, at least as far as we know. From scholarly estimates, this Gospel is the first Gospel that has been written. We see immediately in Mark's Gospel Jesus Christ coming on the scene, in the arena of human history. In fact, in the first thirteen verses Mark is able—as a Holy Spirit gifted writer—to say so much in such a short period of time as he introduces Jesus. Within the span of the first thirteen verses, Mark introduces us to John the Baptist, he introduces us to Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. He introduces us to God the Father, the Holy Spirit, to Satan, to angels... in short, at the beginning of his Gospel, Mark is so concerned that all of us be aware that he is introducing not just someone who has appeared on the scene of human history, but someone supernatural who is both man and Son of God. And it is therefore perfectly natural, as we turn the pages of this Gospel, to find Mark speaking in terms that are not natural to the human mind. He speaks in terms of a real God, a real Holy Spirit, and the real existence of Satan.

In quickly introducing Jesus on the scene of human history, Mark decides not to begin with his baptism, his genealogy or his birth but to begin with the ministry of John the Baptist and within a few short verses of the second paragraph of this Gospel (from verse 2 to verse 8), he portrays for

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us this man, John the Baptist, whose task is preaching and baptizing. John's message is really twofold, for we read in that paragraph that John preached a baptism of repentance unto the forgiveness of sin and he also had a second aspect in his message. He preached saying, "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie" (Mark 1:7, NIV). And people came to hear John, who was anointed by the Spirit, ministering in the shimmering, blistering, limestone desert, along the Jordan River to the north of the Dead Sea, at least thirty miles from Jerusalem. They went out to him to hear him and be baptized by him.

A comparable movement today would be if John the Baptist were to arrive preaching in the hot summer sands of Riverside and all of Costa Mesa and Riverside and Newport Beach went out to hear him, confessing their sins and being baptized out there somewhere in the Santa Ana River. It was in the Jordan that Naaman had had his leper spots washed away and it was again in the Jordan where a scene of cleansing was emerging. John did no miracles. He simply preached whenever there was a message from God. In spite of the energy crisis and the conditions, there are people whose hearts long to be touched by the Spirit of God, who will gather to hear the authentic voice of God being spoken.

He preached a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins, a unique event in his day. His average fellow countrymen believed that there were three things going for every Jew that made him a child of God: his linkage with Abraham (the ancestry was sufficient to produce a child of the covenant, a child of the promise); the Torah, the Law; if that wasn't enough, there was also the temple. Every morning, the day began with the priest offering a sacrifice for the sins of the nation and every evening, the temple activity closed at sunset with another sacrifice for the sins

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of the nation. And all during the day, there were multiple sacrifices offered on behalf of individuals who came.

Yet there was something deeply wrong in the human condition which made them realize that the family background—their linkage with Abraham—was not enough. The possession of the Torah, the Law, the Scripture, was also not enough to put one in a right relationship with God. Not even sacrifices, the act of a priest on behalf of the petitioner, were enough to bring release from guilt and sin and a relationship with God. So John emerged in the wilderness, preaching.

He preached repentance. That word, which is so simple, often escapes us. It means, in the original, an afterthought or a change of mind. It involves the person coming to an understanding that God's ways are best. Regardless of my feelings, regardless of how I perceive life, regardless of whether I agree with Scripture or not, as I come to God's revealed Law, repentance involves the acceptance of God's way rather than my way. How much of human life is broken because we insist on going our way, doing our thing, seeing morals and life our way rather than God's.

Repentance involves more, although it does involve an emotional breaking of the heart. At its root, it means to change your mind. Not simply to cry but to do more than that; to go in a different direction once you've come in contact with God. It was Malachi who had prophesied of John the Baptist, saying that one would come, a messenger. Malachi 3 indicated that, as a result of his preaching, God would speak against the sorcerers, against those who commit adultery, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hireling in his wages, against those who thrust aside the sojourner. It was prophesied of John the Baptist—as the Old Testament closes, in Malachi—that there would come one in the character of Elijah who would turn the hearts of children to their parents and the hearts of parents to their children.

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If you want to know what kinds of sins were being confessed and repented of out in the Jordan River I think you should look to Malachi for an example. People were cheating their employees, committing adultery, thrusting aside the sojourner, there were bad family relationships. And John was pointing out the way to God: repent, change, accept His law and His way. And with that, the confession of sin. The word “confess” is a very simple word: *homologeō*—it’s a combination of two Greek words: *legeō* “to say” and *homo* “the same”—it simply means “to say the same thing.” And what is confession? To say the same thing that God says about us, to pronounce the same verdict on life as God does, to agree with Him. To confess is to agree with God, to relate what is in our life that is out of agreement with Him, and to seek His pardon and release.

John came preaching a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sin. Sin had begun to dwarf the nation, to envelop it. And here was one who was beckoning us to another.

That was the second phase of his message. John said, “History is gathering. The temple rites may go on and on and the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes and the other groups in Judaic life may go on as if nothing was happening. But history is gathering, the fullness of time has come. There is one coming.”

Then quickly Mark shows us this one who steps on the scene of life. Not many words but simply the fact that Jesus came and was baptized. And for a moment, as we’re reading along in the Gospel of Mark, we say, “What’s this?” The others have come to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins but here is one who comes and instead of reading, “As He was baptized confessing His sin,” we find, “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove” (Mark 1:10, NIV). A dove, which never feasts on carrion or anything unclean; a dove, which will dwell only in that which is pure. The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus anointing Him for the ministry which lies ahead. The heavens are opened, the Spirit

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of God descends, and a voice comes from heaven saying, “Thou art My beloved Son. With Thee I am well pleased” (verse 11). And immediately Mark is showing us the supernatural dimensions of the one of whom he is going to write about in his Gospel. Has it ever been heard from the foundation of time that the heavens have opened and God has spoken?

The Romans to whom Mark was writing had an understanding of the power of the Father. In Roman law, the father had absolute control over his sons and daughters. Even when they were grown, the father was still the boss. The father even had authority to institute capital punishment on his sons, his power was that great.

We are concerned, as this Gospel gets under way, about what kind of relationship Jesus has. Mark doesn't show us His human lineage. But he shows us instead that here is one under the power of the heavenly Father. The voice speaks and approves all that Jesus had done. The years of silence in carpentry in Nazareth, the years when He was subject to his parents in all things, all of that is approved. God's blessing is upon Him, and immediately from that point of blessing, He goes out into the wilderness. Mark also wants his readers to know that here is one who didn't come into life with everything given to Him on a silver platter and servants to wait on Him. But He was thrust into the arena of conflict, into issue and challenge with Satan himself in the wilderness. He was with the wild beasts, the leopards, the mountain lions, the wild boars, the hyenas. He faced them all... the stark sheer terror of being alone with the wild beasts. Were not the Christians themselves in Rome shortly after, in the coliseum, to face the wild beasts?

Someone had been there before them. Someone has always been in conflict before us. Someone has always met Satan before we have ever laid eyes on him or his work. Someone has come through, and in the midst of that wilderness experience it is the Spirit of God thrusting Him forth. The Spirit upon Jesus and upon the believer, both in times of blessing and in times of testing, is

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with us in the wilderness. Only God Himself would choose such a risky way to allow His Son to be exposed to the dangers of the wilderness where, in an environment totally unlike Eden, Jesus should meet conflict alone and emerge as the new Adam, the second Adam, the perfect man.

Then He emerges, thrust into His active and public ministry. With so brief an introduction Mark presents him for our vision and for our understanding.

Here in these pages some beautiful lessons unfold for us that are first learned by the disciples of Jesus.

I. The first lesson they must learn about Jesus is: He is someone who has come with a message.

The Gospel of John tells us that at least two of the four fishermen who are called in Mark 1 had been disciples of John the Baptist: John and Andrew. So they had had a previous exposure to Jesus. They had heard His message, the message which He was preaching, as He was going through the synagogues of Galilee, standing up in the place saying, “The time has come... The kingdom of heaven is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:14–15, NIV). Jesus came with a message and, as one who is coming with a message, He had come with authority. Authority right from the crack of the bat. He was speaking with authority. He was speaking with as much authority when His ministry began as when his ministry closed.

I remember my first year of teaching. I shudder at the thought of having the audacity to stand before a class and lecture when I knew so little, and even now know so little. But as one learns and grows and matures, more knowledge is picked up.

But with Jesus it is not so. His words at the beginning are as final, as authoritative and as declarative as at the end. He is the fullness of wisdom and knowledge right from the beginning. Sometimes we think too, “If we simply live the Christian life, it’s enough.” If Jesus had only

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lived His Messiahship, nobody would have known that He was the Messiah. At one point or another He must begin to speak. He must say something. No one can ever know of Him simply by watching His life alone. He must open His mouth and declare the wondrous things of God. Jesus goes through the synagogues of Galilee preaching His message.

Jesus, you see, could preach the same message on more than one occasion. Mark tells us the four points of His outline. Everywhere He went this was His outline: The time is fulfilled, God has acted, history is complete, things are ready for Me. The kingdom of God is at hand, that is, God's rule is busting in. He wants to establish His reign in your life. Maybe Jesus had already begun telling the parables which illustrated the points—the parable, for example, of the sower and the seed, which talks about the entry of the kingdom into our life and how we receive it or whether we receive it. But in those first two points—the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of heaven is at hand—Jesus was saying, “God has taken action. God has taken the initiative with you, with me, with human history. God has entered. And because of that, we must respond.” The response is the same word that John preached: repent. “Change your mind, change your analysis of God, change your thoughts about life, change your idea that there is no God or that God, if He exists, is way up there and out there. Change all that. God is here. The kingdom is at hand. And believe in the good news.” Jesus was already telling the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, the good news; that we can be found, that the Father seeks us and longs to have fellowship with us, the good news that life can be forever with the Son. “Believe the good news,” Jesus was saying. The disciples came to learn, as they heard Him and were exposed to Him, that here was His message, very simply.

II. Another lesson in which they were immediately put to learning, as verse 16 and following shows us, is that Jesus is someone whom the disciples can trust.

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He beckoned: “‘Come, follow me... and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mark 1:17-18, NIV). And Mark so beautifully tells us that their father wasn’t left in all that bad of shape, for the hired servants were left to take care of the business.

But they left and followed Him.

You don’t follow someone with all of your life unless you implicitly trust that individual. That’s the way it is in marriage. You marry someone you trust. And if you married someone you didn’t trust, Lord help you! You’re probably going through some real jams right now. This trusting business, sometimes it happens quickly, sometimes it happens over a period of time. For my wife and I, it happened quickly. Two weeks after our first date, we just knew we were for each other. That’s not the case with everybody. Sometimes there are circumstances, problems, relatives, money, economics, studies, or whatever, before you can put yourself gradually in the position of total trust.

But the disciples sized up Jesus and they came to understand that he was someone they could trust. Why, after all, He trusted them. He trusted them enough to go looking for them and to call them to follow Him. He had not gone to the rabbinic schools of Jerusalem. He had not gone to the leading teacher of the day, Gamaliel, and said, “Gamaliel, who are your best students? I want to talk theology with them. I want to explore the inner recesses of the mind with them. Give Me your best.” He had not. He had sought out men who were willing to learn, men who were willing to obey, and He trusted them with His whole message, with His whole kingdom and with His very life. The cross—we would have never heard of it if these men hadn’t responded to the trust that Jesus placed on them. He trusted them.

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One of the great things about the gospel is that Jesus trusts you, as worthless as you may sometimes feel, as faithless as you may sometimes feel, Jesus trusts you. He trusts and, because He trusts, He inspires trust.

And so they went and followed Him. They didn't know where they were going. They didn't know where He was going. Suppose Jesus had said to them, "Men, I'm going to the cross and you're going with Me. Peter, you will die years later in far off Rome, upside down on a cross. And James, you will be the first disciple to lose your life for My cause. And John, you will be the longest to live but you're going to be exiled one day in your later years on the island of Patmos—four by eight miles—right off of Asia Minor. But come, follow Me." No thanks! The Lord never tells us everything from the beginning. He simply says, "Follow Me!" Our discipleship is always a day at a time, and we always become slightly more capable of responding to the pressure and learning the lessons that are called for in discipleship. The Lord does not let the immature disciple, the young disciple, master the lessons overnight which have taken another disciple years to learn. Faithfully He leads. They didn't know where all He was going to go. They had one thing in mind. He may have had another. He went to the cross and beyond the cross—He went to the tomb and, beyond the tomb, He came out. And beyond that, He ascended to the Father.

When we're called to follow Jesus, we're always called within the sphere of this life. But the call eventually always takes us out of this life into the life to come. And if we follow Him now, we follow Him then. "Follow thou Me."

With feet implanted on the Galilean beach, He had spoken that word to them. And with hands of invitation outstretched, He had called them. Later those hands were to be nailed to a cross and those feet, to a wooden beam. But whether from that place or whether from the cross or wherever

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it is, He still says to each of us, “Follow thou Me and what I make you I will make you become.”

Not overnight. But you will. Have faith.

III. The disciples learned about Jesus that He was somebody with a message and someone whom they could trust, but he was also someone who had power and mastery over evil.

They learned this in the synagogue at Capernaum. And they were to learn it repetitively. A child can be out in a field playing with a wooden model airplane and a bully can come along and destroy his airplane. It's a terrible thing to see that happen. A maniac can gain control of a nation and, in the course of his maniacal rule, kill six million people in a blood thirst. Against the bully in the field, good children and men can gather and subdue him and hopefully arrest him and teach him the right concepts of life and restore the wooden airplanes which have been lost.

Against the maniac who gains control of a nation, armies and men can gather and good men who will to do something can hopefully arrest him and stop him and subdue him. Against those kinds of evil, men can do something.

But there's another kind of evil against which men can do nothing. Who can help the demoniac in the synagogue at Capernaum? Mark is concerned to show us that Jesus came in our life to grapple with evil at a level where human wrestling can never win, where only Jesus can win. The demoniac cries out with that loud voice in that Capernaum synagogue because he hears Jesus teaching: “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” (Mark 1:24, NIV). Jesus, however, makes him come out and forbids him to speak. Jesus will not have the witness of the devil leading men to believe in His identity. But the devils know who Jesus is. Jesus subdues and binds.

The disciples saw this pattern. Sometimes in our world, removed from the gospel world as we are, we tend to look askance at incidents of demon possession. Not anymore. The power of Jesus

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is needed the same today for similar situations. The disciples learned from this lesson that Jesus has power over evil. They learned. It was to become an abiding pattern in their life that ultimately the disciple of Jesus can never be pessimistic. He always has the authority to break through—when we face cancer, when we face financial reverse, when we face the dashing of our dreams as far as the occupational goals might be, when we face death itself. Ultimately, the disciple—while he may weep and while temporarily he may submit in the struggle—knows there's a resiliency, a power, coming from Jesus which says He rules and reigns over evil. He triumphs. And the Hallelujah Chorus is fitting at any time: "The Lord God omnipotent reigns!" The disciples begin to understand the naked authority and power of Jesus as it was revealed.

IV. They also learn something else about Jesus—another lesson. They learned that He is someone who helps others.

We see Him helping others as He goes into the home of Peter's wife and heals the mother-in-law, raises her up—her with an acute fever. They see it again that evening as they bring to Him outside the house in the streets all who were sick and possessed with demons. It's interesting how that synagogue day, that Sabbath Day, progresses. He had healed on the Sabbath Day and then he had gone home, and on that same day, He had healed Peter's wife's mother and then, when the Sabbath was past, they began bringing to Him the sick. Why did they wait till the evening? It was against the law to work on the Sabbath and you couldn't carry the sick on the Sabbath, so as soon as they saw that sun slipping over the edge of the horizon, out goes the word: "Get the sick and bring them!" I'd like to have been a cameraman on the edge of the roof, shooting the scenes of those streets and alleys of Capernaum as they brought the sick to Jesus to be healed in the street.

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In fact, Mark shows us so beautifully where Christ healed. He healed in the synagogue, which would be comparable now to our church. He healed in the home. He healed in the street and He healed out in the open place—the leper. He was someone who helped others. He didn't heal for a fee and He didn't heal for a crowd. He didn't hang a banner over His ministry saying, "Signs and wonders being done here tonight! Come and watch!" His healings were not produced that He might get the throne. His healings were produced because He had compassion and because He wanted to help.

In that beautiful last paragraph of Mark 1, we see a leper, eaten away by the disease, who comes to Jesus. He doesn't say to Jesus, "If You *can*, heal me," because he knew Jesus had the power. He's concerned with Jesus' emotion. He says, "If you are willing, you can make me clean" (Mark 1:40, NIV). Jesus heals him, then tells him to be quiet. He doesn't want his advertisement. When the man advertises it, it simply makes Jesus' geographical movements tougher. He can no longer openly enter a town, but is out in the open country and people come to Him from every quarter. He heals because He wants to help.

A fundamental perspective on life in regard to Jesus: He cares. He cares for the individual.

V. The disciples also learned another lesson. They learned that He is someone in direct contact, in communion with God.

Mark 1:35 relates that, "Very early in the morning [that is, after this great Sabbath Day in which He had cast out the demon, healed Peter's mother-in-law, healed the sick out in the street], while it was still dark [before daylight savings time], Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed" (NIV). I think anybody who's ever been away from home or a loved one can immediately identify with this. When you're away, you want to commune, to talk and to share those hours together again. And that was Jesus. Away from the abode of His Father,

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but nevertheless out before the break of day, while it is still dark, to pray so that the disciples might learn while watching Him pray that prayer as seen by Jesus is not simply the bringing of requests, but is the establishment of a conversation, a relationship, a communion, a heart-to-heart talk. And Jesus longed for those moments when He could be alone with the Father.

The disciples at this time couldn't have given you a definition of the Trinity, they couldn't have given you an excursus on the inspiration of Scripture, let alone tell you what the Messiah was for. Their idea of the Messiah, as we'll see later through this Gospel, was not really what Jesus' own idea was. They didn't know everything about Him. But this thing they did know: He knew God.

And really, when it comes down to it, in respect to our faith, we're not attracted to the gospel because of beautiful church buildings or because of fine liturgies or because of winsome advertisements or gospel concerts. In the last analysis, we're attracted to the gospel of Jesus Christ because it's as if there's a magnet sent out from heaven that draws our heart and says, "Here... if you want to be in touch with God, here is the person to be in touch with: Jesus." The disciples came to know that. As they walked in the way, in the heat of the day and in the cool of the afternoons, in the kindled fireside underneath a moonlit sky, they shared His life, they heard Him talk. They asked Him questions. They watched Him work. They came to understand and to believe that they had fellowshiped with the Son of God. "God so loved the world that He sent His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). As you gather your heart around this Gospel, you will hear Jesus speaking to you again. He will walk once more with you through the roads of life, and you will see Him work and you will hear Him speak. For you will come the opportunity—and has come the opportunity—to believe in the Good News, the Gospel, Jesus Christ.