

HOW TO OPEN THE WORLD'S GREATEST BOOK

How To Study The Bible

Part 1

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We'll use the first 8 chapters of Mark's gospel as a guide. I want to talk with you a few moments about the study of the Bible. One of our goals as a Christian. It's a lifelong process to really do that. I'm not sure that even after a lifetime we've completely absorbed all that is here. But one of the certain essentials that we have as a Christian in order to grow is to take this word and begin that process of internalization. I've found as I've personally been on this pilgrimage of studying the Bible that there are some impediments to taking God's word on a personal level. Some obstacles to effective and good Bible study habits. I want to begin by noting some of the difficulties I think we as ordinary people have in opening the Bible. Especially if we're not used to studying and are opening it.

One thing that is very obvious, a kind of reason for not studying the Bible very well is that the Bible is a very big book. My Bible has 1635 pages to it, of text, ranging from in the Old Testament history to poetry to prophecy and in the New Testament from history to letters to prophecy. There are many different types of literature, many styles of writers, a book, which spans 1800 years of human history. It's a very big book. Sometimes it may seem to a person who is not used to studying the Bible that it's almost climbing Mount Everest. How do you take this Bible and begin somewhere and develop an effective study pattern?

So we try different kinds of ways. I suppose one of the first ways I tried was to simply read the Bible through. I must confess that in my first few times of trying to read the Bible through and especially this came with New Years resolutions. I did well all the through Genesis. Genesis flows by rather easily. Exodus is somewhat ok until you hit about chapter 24 and start reading about the tabernacle and all the color and the tapestry and the almond flowers and the lamp stands of pure gold and the priestly garments and the tassels on the robe. Then you hit Leviticus. And things start slowing down. By the time if you've made it through Leviticus along with the children of Israel in the book of Numbers you too have had your wagon break down in the wilderness. A lot of us never make it through the book of Numbers on our read-the-Bible-through plan.

I decided last year I was going to read the Bible through as a goal of that year. I made it but I must confess to you that reading the Bible through is not my favorite way of studying the Bible. Although I think there is value to the synoptic or overview of scripture. We at times just need to read and ingest massive portions of God's word even if the time is going by fast and we're flying at 30,000 feet and we don't understand it all. I think that reading the Bible through at like three chapters a day or five chapters a day is sort of like flying at 30,000 feet. If you've gotten stuck in the book of Numbers maybe you need to explore something different.

Sometimes we don't know where to begin. We might not try to read the Bible through. We might sort of plunk down in a place that looks pleasant. Like the Psalms for example. The Psalms are great except sometimes when you're reading along in the Psalms if you haven't had a study in the Psalms maybe they seem redundant and there are phrases that you don't exactly know how to take. Like "Break their teeth in their mouth, O Lord" and a few things like that. Then we run into long Psalms and phraseology that we don't understand. I've found that it's possible if you're a beginning Bible student to get even bogged down in the Psalms.

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When I was growing up my mother told me there was always a special blessing to reading the book of Revelation. And indeed that's what Revelation says, "Blessed are those who read this book." My thing as a child in the home was every Sunday afternoon get out the book of Revelation and read it. I wanted a blessing. I had no idea what a blessing was but if it was there for me I wanted it. I believe the Lord gave that innocent child like desire to know more of God's word somehow percolated down in the deeper levels as I grew up. About what I understand about Revelation is like the countryman said, In the end Jesus is going to win! That's sometimes our level of knowledge what this book is saying.

Am I saying don't read Revelation, don't read Psalms, don't read Numbers. No. By all means. But I'm not sure that's the best starting place.

Sometimes when we get frustrated we just do like the Plymouth brethren or the Moravians that started this practice about 3½ centuries ago. Open the Bible and his eyes fell on a page, on a word. Other people began picking that up and finding that at times it really does work. But that's too not a very good way of studying the Bible. If you make that a practice, on a daily basis just opening it up and seeing where it opens. That doesn't allow for any continuity of development or thought or growth in the subject material. Besides nine times out of ten you wind up on some obscure verse that has no significant meaning to you.

The result of that kind of hit and miss approach to studying the Bible can be solved. I think if you're studying the Bible for the very first time or want to get into good study habits the place to really begin is with the center of the Bible, which is the personality and person of Jesus Christ. The place to do that is in the gospels. It is through the gospels of course that we understand what has gone before the gospels. Namely the Old Testament. It is from the gospels that we understand the setting for what follows. I would recommend that we begin with the centerpiece, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You can take your pick – Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. I personally really discover Jesus Christ in the gospel of Mark. And since it's the shortest gospel it is the easiest one to begin with. It's the most direct. It's the gospel of action. It has less teaching material and more action material. For those of us who have short attention spans that's especially helpful. I'd recommend in studying the Bible we begin with a gospel.

The Bible's so big I don't know where to begin. Start with the gospels. Let's use the gospel of Mark.

Another thing that stands as an impediment to studying the Bible is "When I read the Bible I fall asleep. I get bored." Nobody is going to confess that that has happened to them! I've found that my attention has lagged at times in reading the Bible. When I make a comment on scripture that it is boring for example I may not be actually commenting on the scripture. I may be commenting about myself. It's like the guy who walks into an art gallery and sees fabulous masterpieces and makes a judgment that those are worthless. He is really making a comment about his own lack of esthetic interest or ability.

One of the things that I've done that has kind of been fun over the years is I take what are the typically boring passages of scriptures like where there's long lists of names and those kind of

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things and try to really meditate on them to get honey out of the rock. It's amazing to me how scripture speaks to us.

One of the things that helped the Bible become a more alive book for me was to use a translation that spoke more directly to me. When I'm in the gospel of Mark I find it more helpful to use the translation that helped that book first come alive to me which is the Revised Standard Version. Not the version we're using in the pew Bible. I've been retraining myself to become an NIVite. I really cut my teeth biblically on the Revised Standard Version. Many of you cut your teeth on the King James Version. I think one has to decide what is a comfortable version to them. And really when it comes right down to it there's not any significant doctrinal points that are differences among the various translation of scripture. What they're trying to do is put the Bible to us in terms that can be readable and understandable.

A comment on the Living Bible, which many of us like the personal reading, I'm not sure the Living Bible is a good study Bible. It's a great Bible to read and it's fun to hear read publicly. But for a good study Bible you need something that's a little bit more precise and accurate and faithful to the original text.

Another kind of objection to really getting into the Bible is "But I don't get anything out of it." May I suggest that one of the things that we do to get something out of scripture is treat the Bible as something to be studied. I know when I'm studying, I'm taking notes. I use yellow pads for my note taking. I have stacks of yellow pads I keep working with. Use something that's comfortable and set there and jot things down as you read.

Let me give you some things to write down to ask yourself as you read scripture. I'm convinced that as an individual Christian we really can get an effective Bible study going without external aids. That is without the commentaries, without the Scofield Reference Bible, without all the complicated things we think we need to have in order to understand the scripture correctly. If we're trying to approach it devotionally the word of God is powerful enough to speak to us without any filter, without any intermediary at all. It can just flat out directly speak to us.

I've used a couple patterns to get something out of the word of God. We'll be using this as we go to the gospel of Mark.

One is to simply take the six words with which all questions begin and to continually ask those questions of the scriptural text. The six words are What? What is happening here? Maybe an expansion of that. Who? Who is involved? Where? Where is this taking place? Understanding geographical local can help tremendously as we'll see as we go through Mark. When? When is this happening? Why? Why is this in the scripture? Why does Mark treat things in this way? Continually asking why. Then the 6th and vital question and is How? How do I apply this to my life?

Continue to work those six questions. Make all of them work.

Another pattern just to use when you study the scripture is to list these words as a sequence for study. The sequence for Bible study when you take a particular passage is Observation. That simply involves, What do I see here? What's on the surface? What is there to note? Maybe in

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this passage what have I not seen before? We're going to do that as we look at the first 13 verses of Mark. Observation.

Then another question: Interpretation. Why is this here? We begin to force ourselves to ask, Why would the Holy Spirit not only put this in the scripture but why would he bring this into my life at this particular time.

Third, correlation. How does this segment of God's word which I am reading now fit in to the Bible? Fit in to what has gone before it? Fit in to what comes after it? How can I keep tying things together? Correlation.

Application. How do I take this and apply it to my life? One of the mistakes I think we sometimes make in Bible study is to first open the scripture and immediately try to begin applying it without first understanding what it is saying.

Fifth, communication. What is here that is exciting that has been a blessing to me that I can pass on to someone else. Communication.

With those things in mind we'll look at the opening of the gospel of Mark. Just try to pattern a Bible study where it sort of flows out naturally and easily. When I've had the privilege of teaching this class on a college level or seminary level at this point I quit lecturing and I do handouts. Where people can have the time to get into the scripture on their own and then break into small group discussions. And you see the things yourself without me giving them to you. In a larger group like this it's more difficult to do that. We'll forego that.

One of the things that I would recommend in Bible study is that we take it slowly. Be realistic in your time schedule. How much time a day are you willing to give to a study of God's word. If you will give 15 minutes a day you are giving 1/96th of a day to the Lord. Every day has 96 fifteen-minute units. So if you can at last study God's word for 15 minutes a day that's a great beginning. Since we're at the start of a New Year maybe a lot of you have made New Year's resolutions and the like about being more effective in your personal life as a Christian. I've learned that it's extremely helpful to take things slowly at first. Don't think that if you're out of shape you can all of a sudden start bench pressing 300 pounds or running 4 miles. Physical exercise takes time. Spiritual exercise is no different than physical exercise. If you say I haven't been a person of God up to this moment but in 1987, January 1, I'm going to become a mighty spiritual giant. I'm going to read the Bible two hours a day and I'm going to pray three hours a day. I can almost tell you unless you're one of the world's most unusual persons that you're going to crash. You've got to build up to that kind of strength. Start out with something realistic. If you're only going to spend maybe 15 minutes or a half an hour then take a passage that is small enough to allow you some time to really meditate upon the word of God and really dig into it.

That's different than reading time. In reading time you're just taking large blocks of material. We're talking now about mediational time, about getting into God's word, sitting there with a pad and a pen or pencil in your hand and jotting things down and absorbing.

So to get into the text of Mark tonight we'll just take the first 13 verses. That will occupy plenty of our time.

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“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 thy face. He shall prepare thy way. They voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.’ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. There went out to him all the country of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and a leather girdle around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. He preached saying, ‘After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong 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 those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. When he came up out of the water immediately he saw the heavens open and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove and a voice came from heaven, ‘Thou art my beloved Son. With thee I am well pleased.’ The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness 40 days tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild beasts and the angels ministered unto him.”

The first thing I do in Bible study when I get done reading a passage like that is I find where the paragraph units are. Why are paragraphs important? Because literally paragraphs contain one central unit of thought. So if I can identify the paragraphs and give them a title it helps me to memorize God’s word. As an actual matter of fact this gospel of Mark which I’m holding in my hand is 116 distinct and separate paragraphs in the modern text, in the newer translations. How can I take this gospel of Mark and internalize it the extent that I know it stone cold and God’s word speaks to me. I literally put it in to my head and my heart and I can think my way without even having the book in front of me, I can think my way through the gospel of Mark. How can a person do that?

One of the real keys is simply shorthand. Giving little titles to things. It isn’t anything that will give you a spiritual beating of the chest like we’ve made some new great discovery. It’s just skullduggery kinds of things. Sort of like prospecting. Sort of laying the ground out.

There are four paragraphs in the Bible verses, which I have just read. I give them each a title. The first paragraph for me would be “the beginning of the gospel.” The second paragraph beginning with verse 2 “John the Baptist.” That’s what that paragraph is about. John the Baptist. No fancy title like “Jordan River protest movement.” Just take words that are straight out of the text – John the Baptist. That’s the problem we get into in memory work in the scripture. When I’m trying to find titles my imagination sometimes gets carried away and then I can’t remember the title I invented that was so fancy. We’re not talking about sermon titles here. We’re just talking about taking a word out of the text and summarizing it.

Then the third paragraph is “baptism.” The fourth paragraph is “temptation.”

So in just four little titles we have the whole first 13 verses memorized. We’ve established paragraph titles and we’ll do that every time. As we do that we’ll begin to see when we get into individual units that they fit together in blocks of material. I used to think that somehow the gospel writers were like automatic dictators and they didn’t organize their material. I’ve learned in studying the scripture that the Holy Spirit allowed them a great deal of freedom in organizing material and grouping it around themes and ideas and chronological events. You’ll find this as

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you go through Mark that the Holy Spirit is not unorganized as he manifests himself through human personality. The gospels are highly organized in terms of their content layout. You'll find that these individual units will form a major unit. We'll see that progression.

These four paragraphs together form a unit I'll simply call Preparation. They are preparational for the public ministry of Jesus.

When we get done with the gospel of Mark if we were to take the whole 16 chapters we would have 15 major units by the time we finished. We'll only do about 8 in going through the first 8 chapters. But the first major unit are these four paragraphs. Simply "preparation."

One of the other things we want to do as we get into studying the Bible on our own is to what I would call just scanning the text as a whole before we dive into individual parts. We want to sort of back off and say, What's here? How does this compare with other scriptures? How does this initially grab me? And impress me?

One of the things right off that you can see in these first 4 paragraphs is that there are some things that are missing from Mark's account of Jesus' ministry. Aren't there? What's missing? How does Mark differ from Matthew and Luke and John. John begins with a prologue "In the beginning was the word..." He sets this beautiful theological prologue of 18 verses to talk about the logos becoming flesh. Matthew begins with genealogy and the account of the birth of Jesus and dreams to Joseph and the visit of the Magi. Luke begins with describing the birth of John the Baptist, the enunciation to Mary, the birth in Bethlehem, the visitor shepherds and finally the boy growing up in favor with God and man.

Mark omits all of that. It's gone. The birth is not mentioned. The growing up years are not mentioned. Just bang! Slam, bang! Mark dives right into the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. We ought to note that not that it has any spiritual revelation to our heart. But we're certainly dealing with a gospel that dives right in.

Then we start asking Why? Why would Mark do this? If I were writing a gospel, if I were writing about Jesus would I do it like Mark? Would I omit those great moments of the birth, the nativity, that are described for us in the other gospels? Mark presents Jesus as the man of action. We'll see again and again through his use of a little word – we've already seen it twice in the 13 verses we read – a word called "immediately." It's use 40 or 41 times in Mark. When he uses "immediately" it doesn't mean the next thing necessarily. The next thing chronologically. It means perhaps the next thing I'm going to talk about. But it gives you the impression of tremendous action. When you think back and realize that when the gospel was first heard by persons it was generally heard not by reading it but by listening to it. The common person did not have Xerox machines or the ability to have this in his hand. So it was read. Remember when Paul said, "Give attention to the public reading of the Word." If you're going to have things publicly communicated you need to be terse and brief. So Mark has short, brief, concise, get to the point and get it said. That's what we'll encounter as we go through.

Another thing as you look at this passage as a whole and you can see things on your own, I'm just kind of reflecting some of the things I see. Mark sets the plot line for the whole gospel in an incredible way within 13 verses. I'm a wordy person. It's going to take me minutes just to comment on Mark's 13 verses. But look at the characters he introduces just in those 13 verses.

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Jesus, John the Baptist the preparer, the Holy Spirit, the Father – not mentioned by the name “Father” but you know he’s the Father because he says “this is My Son,” Satan, angels, wild beasts. In 13 verses he’s put everything out there in terms of the story line. There’s God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit – the trinity. There are God’s messengers – personages who carry out God’s mission – the angels. Then there’s the other side – the devil. Then there’s the human side – John the Baptist preparing the way. Then there is the animal kingdom – the wild beasts – no longer under man’s dominion but wild and not subject to man even the Son of man.

So he takes us in just a short moment and brings us into focus with also the things that really count in human history – God, the opposition of the evil one and then the announcement of Jesus coming.

So in very quick way he introduces us to what will be the major theme of his gospel which he articulates in the first verse – the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Take a moment and meditate on that little phrase. It’s a powerful phrase. Like introductory sentences or phrases it can be easily skipped over. It’s not meant to be skipped over though. It telegraphs a lot about Mark.

Someone commented one time about C.M.Ward, Radio Revival Time speaker. You could always tell if C.M.Ward was on the Mark in a sermon by how he handled the first 2 or 3 sentences. If his first 2 or 3 sentences were interesting and to the point it was going to be a great sermon. But if he started meandering in the first few sentences you know you were in for a long night. That’s probably true and probably true of mine as well.

Opening sentences, opening statement are such a key to direction and where we’re going. In Mark’s case it’s well thought out. Notice the statement he makes is an unfinished sentence. It’s the only unfinished sentence in his gospel. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” No verb. Just a phrase hanging out there. Like it’s title. What is it a title to? What does he mean, “the beginning of the gospel.” What is gospel? Gospel is simply “good news.” We need good news in life. It’s almost a shame that this word in our culture has become *gospel* in a sense that it muffles a little bit that “We’ve got good news.” Our life is filled with so much bad news.

Mark says I’ve got good news. The beginning of the good news and the good news is about a person. We take things for granted from our perspective because these terms are familiar to us. Put yourself in the place of the person who hears this word for the first time. The good news of what? What’s good news in life?

Say you are a Roman to whom this gospel was probably first written. You’ve spent a long day from early morning till sunset working in some menial slave job and some friend has invited you to a group “cult” that was meeting in Rome around somebody that used to minister out in the outer provinces of Galilee. They want you to hear about that person. You come and the words strike you: good news in life. This humdrum life. Is there good news anywhere? What is the good news? The good news is about a person. Who is the person? Jesus! Christ? What’s that? The anointed one. The Messiah. Son of God. Is it possible that God could have a Son? Is it possible that we could know that Son? Are we really going to learn about that Son in what is being said? The good news. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

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What's beginning? Some thing that maybe here what Mark is referring to in the beginning is simply that John's message was the beginning of the gospel. I don't think so. I think Mark was an effective journalist. Mark bears all the style of tremendous journalism. A lead paragraph, you know when you're writing for a newspaper that your lead paragraph is so critical. If you take the whole gospel and get to the end and put it all together what Mark is saying really about this whole gospel that everything between the first verse and the last verse is only the beginning of the good news. If you tie that together with Acts 1:1 where Luke says, "A former book I wrote to you Theophilus of all the things that Jesus began to do and teach." He's talking about the gospel of Luke and saying that is only the beginning of what Jesus began to do. We come to linking Acts 1:1 with Mark 1:1 and see that the gospel writers themselves saw the early ministry of Jesus as simply a beginning. The good news is not over. The good news is burst up and gaining speed in our lives. The good news is still going on today. It's beginning in our hearts, it's continuing in our hearts, and the good news is going to keep coming until the Lord himself returns in glory. All of this book is about the good news and it's always beginning. Life is not going down to the pits. We're confronted at times with depression, hard blows, and knocks in life. But we come back to the fact that here is good news beginning, every renewed like springtime it comes, it's dependable, it's always on time. It's the good news and Jesus was always good news in life.

That's what this gospel is dramatically telling us right at the outset. It's the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ Son of God.

Mark goes from that and jumps into the story of John the Baptist. John appeared in the wilderness. Three times in these 13 verses he uses the word "wilderness." John's in the wilderness preparing the way of the Lord in the wilderness. Jesus goes out into the wilderness. How many of us have been in the wilderness? A place of desolation. A place where the children of Israel wandered for 40 years is in the wilderness. In the desolate times of life that God is raising up salvation. So John is out there. Mark uses an interesting phrase "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet..." and then he proceeds to combine Exodus 23:20, Malachi 1:1, and Isaiah 43 into one coalition of scripture where he says, "Behold I send my messenger before thy face who shall prepare thy way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight." The text in Isaiah 40 is such a great text. Isaiah 40 begins by announcing the dawning of the age of the Messiah with the coming of the preparer. "Every valley shall be exalted and every high place shall be brought low." What beautiful poetic words to simply tell us that the job of a way preparing for a king was to get the roads straight. No potholes in the road. The valleys were the holes, the potholes so you fill them in. The high places were the speed bumps and you level those low. You don't want the king going over the speed bumps. So in beautiful poetic language it's the function of the way preparer to make straight the road. John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness doing this very thing. In clear language Mark is telling us that John's mission is like unto that of Elijah who wore himself the camel's hair garment and the leather girdle around his waist.

In Jerusalem, there's a connection of four synagogues that's back by the wailing wall, the Western Wall. In the main window of that synagogue beautifully restored, high up in the window there is a ram's horn and there is vile of oil. For the last several centuries it has been the tradition in that synagogue that when Elijah the prophet came to announce the coming of the Messiah he would come into that synagogue in Jerusalem and go up high – it's about 20 feet up

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in the air – and get the ram's horn and blow it and announce the coming of the Messiah. Then he would take the oil and he would pour it on the Messiah's head and anoint him.

If you go into any orthodox synagogue you'll find a seat there called Elijah's seat that is empty. It is often the seat in which circumcisions are done in the synagogue. Why is the Elijah seat there? It's there in the synagogue to symbolize that one day the prophet Elijah is going to show up and say, "Now is the time. The Messiah is here."

Mark knowing that biblical expectation, that one like Elijah, an Elijah like person would come, he begins with the historical detail of John the Baptist out in the wilderness. In effect what John is doing is blowing the ram's horn. What the Spirit is doing in descending upon Jesus is anointing him for his task. God's anointed one is here. In the Old Testament three offices were anointed. The office of king, the office of priest, the office of prophet. Jesus is all of those rolled into one. He's God's ruler over us. He's God's voice to us. He's got intercessor for us. He is priest, prophet and king.

John the Baptist out in the wilderness, not too far from where the Essene community had their practice. John is saying that one must prepare for the coming of the Messiah by being baptized for the forgiveness of sins. That should peak our interest. If we know anything about the Bible we know that's not the way in the Old Testament sins were dealt with. Leviticus 17:11 says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." So the Old Testament way of dealing with sin was to bring an animal and have a sacrifice in the temple as a substitute or as an atonement to make us one with God. Now John the Baptist out there in the wilderness is saying, Why go up to Jerusalem? Why not repent from your heart? Why go through the liturgy? Why not let it be real to you? Come down here and get washed.

In Judaism of that day there were two kinds of washings and still today in Judaism baptism is practiced. There's the immersion tank. And especially this is for women who are to be made clean from the cycles of a woman's experience. In fact the orthodox women in Jerusalem, super orthodox, many of these women, especially the older ones are completely bald headed. They wear a wig. They're bald because when they're in baptism, in immersion, they wouldn't take the chance that one of the hairs of their heads would float above the water. So to make sure it's literally carried out – the cleansing – one is placed completely in the water and they're bald.

The Essenes down by the Jordan were practicing a baptism daily where they separated the working part of the day from the religious part of the day. John is saying this baptism is not a repeated kind of a thing. It's once for all. Come down, confess your sins and get them washed and turned from the secular life you've been living, the life without God is a life of religious observance, to a life of dedication to God. He's preaching that out in the wilderness. A wild strange character. A vegetarian. A tree called the carob tree is the locust tree. Still today it's called St John's bread. It may well be this is what John was eating. The life of an aesthetic but what a powerful ministry.

When I come face to face with John the Baptist I have to ask myself what really draws me. When I see how people come from Judea and Jerusalem out to hear the man preach I ask myself am I willing to walk for a solid day to hear somebody preach? Or is my interest in religious things limited to seeing God do something very significant in terms facts of healing or something that will kind of peek my interest. John the Baptist out there in the wilderness wasn't healing

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anybody. He was simply delivering a straight shot from God's heart to people. That's always the case where there is an authentic word for God, it touches a vacant spot in our life and we respond.

John's message was more than simply getting baptized. Although that was important. To that he was saying the systems God has used up till now he's changing. No longer will he use the temple and animal sacrifice. But he's pointing to one who is greater than himself. John said, I baptized you with something that was an external element. He's going to immerse you in something that is spiritual. He will baptize you with the Spirit. It's interesting when you do correlation. Remember earlier I talked about observation, interpretation, correlation, application and communication. Where you do correlation – tying scripture with scripture you'll find that Mark 1:8 is quoted in Acts 11 when Peter has to give an account to the Jerusalem church of the Gentiles receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit with speaking in tongues he says I remember the word of John how he said, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. What John said was that Jesus is going to thoroughly soak us in the life of God. And give to us his Spirit.

We around religious things can barely dabble and just get wet or we can make the kind of commitment to God in our life where we can get thoroughly soaked and saturated with the Spirit of God. John says that's Jesus' mission. Jesus' mission is to bring us into a dimension of life in God that thoroughly soaks every aspect of our personality and being. To be alive with God through and through. To be filled with his Spirit.

So Jesus himself comes to John. In very terse words Mark tells us about it. How he came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized. When he came out of the water he saw the heavens open. This is the first time as far as we know and certainly the other gospels would bear this out where Jesus heard the direct voice of the Father speaking to him. I think there is only one other occasion in John where the Lord speaks again. Thirty years of silence. Yet at the end of that 30 years the Father is saying, "I'm well pleased with you."

I think we need to take those words for our own baptism. When we're baptized as a Christian the Father has that same attitude – "I'm well pleased that you're making this step." Notice that Mark does not say that Jesus needed to be baptized for the confession of his sins. But simply he was baptized.

What happens following Jesus' baptism? Strange phrase. The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. The Spirit that descended upon him then drives him out into the wilderness for 40 days. And by the way Mark omits the three specific temptations. But just let the whole period of time be what it was. A testing. A temptation. If Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness, the new Israel of God, Jesus, the personification of Israel will spend 40 days out there. Unlike the old Israel he will not fail the tests. He will be true. Before God does anything even the giving to us the Messiah he tests it. And determines its worth and its mettle.

Jesus was out in the wilderness being tested. Notice the Spirit's role. The same Spirit that descended upon Jesus is the Spirit, which drove him into the wilderness.

When I first discovered this it did a wonderful thing in my life. I've had a problem with mountaintop experiences. I've had my share of spiritual mountaintop experiences. There can be nothing so damaging to your spiritual health than attending seminary. Why? Because

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sometimes you're so much into the text and you're so much into the "criticism" of scripture leaning higher and lower criticism and everybody's views that you can actually lose God in the process. You can become so theological oriented that you lose the dynamic of a relationship with God. There were times when I came close to doing that. I can remember on several occasions being at camp in a college retreat or a single adult retreat and nearer seemingly the heavens, up there in the mountains and feeling so rejuvenated. Then coming back to the smog of Pasadena. The thing that would strike me was that I thought up on the mountain I had finally settled everything with God and that I was in an elevated state of spiritual existence that would help me sail through the rest of my life and when I got back down to that valley of Pasadena things were worse than they had ever been in terms of my struggle intellectually and spiritually and all this kind of stuff. I couldn't put the two together. I kept thinking, Lord why this dichotomy between spiritual revelation and the terrible times of depression and even wondering if I'm a Christian or if there is a God.

It was Mark that helped me see the Spirit's role. That the times of wilderness in our life were not accidental. That Jesus didn't accidentally go off into the wilderness. That it was the Spirit that drove him. And Mark helped me see the connection that following the great spiritual high in the Lord's life there was the great depression in his life. The heavens opened one day, the voice spoke to him from heaven, the Spirit descended. All that was a wonderful elevating powerful time in the Lord's experience. The next moment spiritually he is locationally in the lowest spot in the world. The Jordan Rift valley. The Dead Sea area where it's 1200 feet below sea level. That's where he is spiritually out in the wilderness, down in the pits.

But is he there accidentally? No. The Spirit drove him.

It was such a refreshing thing to know that in the times of wilderness we are not there alone. The Spirit is guiding.

I see these things out of the first 4 paragraphs of the gospel of Mark. Some on the observational level. Some on the devotional level. But it's sort of a result of looking at the text as a whole, getting the paragraph titles and looking at some things about the passage in general and then beginning to pick through and continuing to ask, Why is this here? What is it saying to me? How do I apply it? Lord, make it personal in my life.

Jesus is the beginning of the good news in our life.

Lord, friends may be here this evening who need some real good news. Maybe the news hasn't been so good lately in their life. In a world where everything follows the law of death and decay we're so glad that you have introduced into this world another kind of law which is onward and upward. Life giving and renewing. The law of Jesus Christ our Lord, the giver of life who is always the beginning of good news in our life. If all around us our news is bad, for sure Lord Jesus, in you the news is good. You've come to reach us, love us, win us, guide us, lead us. You're here. You're introduced by John. And you've been here ministering in the world in these years. Now you're ministering to us. You've come on a mission to wash us from our sins and to baptize us into the Spirit to make every poor of our being alive and present with God. We thank you for that. We thank you for faith in our life and for hope. We pray as we journey together through this gospel of Mark that your life will become very large in our heart. It is when you are large in us that we gain perspective on

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everything that is around us and things which may be very big and pressing lose their gigantic quality when you the living Lord are living largely in us. Thank you for your presence here this evening. As we gather around your table of communion we do so now with hearts of thanksgiving and joy. So grateful that here tonight over the distance of the miles and across the centuries the good news has come also to us and we are partakers of the bread and the cup and members of the household of God and the community of faith and of the saints who have followed you at all times and all ages. Thank you for your presence here and for these moments we have to treasure the relationship that you have with us. We do praise your name and give you thanks. In Christ. Amen.