

**“THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL”**

Today we begin a new series on the Gospel of Mark. God has blessed us with not just one, but four Gospels; four perspectives on the meaning and significance of the incarnation, life, ministry, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These four books stand at the very heart of the Scriptures, because Jesus Christ is the heart of the Scriptures.

In our New Testament, Mark is placed after Matthew as the second of the four Gospels. However, the prevailing view in biblical scholarship is that Mark was the first Gospel to have been written, probably sometime after the death of the apostle Peter and before the fall of Jerusalem, which is basically between 65 and 70 AD. The similarities that Mark shares with Matthew and Luke have led biblical scholars to refer to these three as the Synoptic Gospels, which simply means that they look alike, especially when compared to the Gospel of John, which selects and presents material in its own very unique way. Most interpreters believe that Mark was written first, and that Matthew and Luke had Mark's account available to them as one of their sources while they were writing their Gospels. This would then explain the striking similarities between the first three Gospels.

While Mark is not named as the author in the text itself, the title “According to Mark” came to be attached to this Gospel at a very early stage in its transmission, and Mark is

named as its author by a number of second century writers. Also, it is generally agreed that Mark's chief source was the apostle Peter himself. We saw the connection between Mark and Peter in last week's sermon as we concluded our study of 1 Peter, where Peter's closing greetings in that letter revealed that Mark was with him in Rome. One of the key pieces of evidence leading to the conclusion that Peter was Mark's source comes from a second century bishop in Asia Minor named Papias, who says that Mark wrote his Gospel as Peter's "interpreter." This is further supported by the strong eyewitness flavor of Mark's Gospel. There are a number of details mentioned throughout the book, details that only an eyewitness would be able to provide. And Peter was one of the Lord's twelve disciples. He saw the miracles and teachings of Christ firsthand. He witnessed Jesus' transfiguration. He was there when Jesus was handed over to be crucified. He met and spoke with the risen Christ. In all likelihood, the Gospel of Mark is Peter's telling of the story of the life and ministry of our Lord.

And this might also help to explain one of the peculiar features of the Gospel of Mark. If you have ever read it, and especially if you have given much thought to how it compares with the other Gospels, you know that Mark is a very fast-paced Gospel. It is the shortest and most streamlined of the four Gospels. Proportionately, it contains more miracles, and fewer parables and teachings, when compared to the other Gospels. And Mark is especially fond of the word "immediately," which appears 42 times in these 16 chapters. It is not very hard to imagine Mark being infected with Peter's own sense of wonder and

excitement as Peter recounted the miracles, the exorcisms, the teachings, the authority, and the glory that he had seen and heard as he lived with Jesus during the three years of his public ministry.

There is certainly a biographical nature to the Gospel of Mark. Christianity is a religion rooted in history. As J. Gresham Machen wrote, “Christianity depends not upon a complex of ideas but upon the narration of an event.” (Hart, *Defending the Faith*, 78) The Gospel of Mark is a historical account of the life of Jesus Christ. At the same time, there is also a sense in which Mark is unlike any other biography. Many of the elements of a typical biography are missing in Mark: there is nothing about Jesus’ childhood; there is no description of his physical appearance; there is not even very much about the particular features of his personality. Mark is not merely describing the life of one man among many others. He is proclaiming that this one life is the life that makes all the difference in the world. His gospel is a proclamation that Jesus is the way of salvation.

Now, I want to pause for a moment in order to call your attention to something that may have just happened. If you have been a Christian for any length of time, or even if you have merely been exposed to the teaching of the church for any length of time, the words that I just spoke may not have really registered with you. I just said that Mark’s Gospel is the proclamation that Jesus is the way of salvation. Yes, but you have heard that before, haven’t you? This points to one of the great dangers of spiritual knowledge: familiarity

breeds forgetfulness. What I mean is this. When we begin to have the attitude that says, 'I have heard all of this before,' that is the point when we begin to lose sight of the real significance of what we are claiming to know. Any time we greet the proclamation of the gospel with a yawn, any time we respond to the message of salvation with indifference, we are showing that we do not really appreciate what our Savior has done for us.

Brothers and sisters, may this not be true of us! Instead,

*Let us love, and sing, and wonder; let us praise the Savior's name!*

*He has hushed the law's loud thunder, he has quenched Mount Sinai's flame.*

*He has washed us with his blood, he has brought us nigh to God.*

As we study this Gospel, let it stir your soul to ever deeper reflection upon, and grateful appreciation for, the glorious redemption that Christ has purchased for you.

This opening verse is packed with key terms that serve as the introduction for the entire book. The first of these is the one that we might be most inclined to overlook: the term "beginning." It is a very rich word, a word that Mark employs in several different ways here. First, it introduces the opening scene of Mark's account of the Gospel: the preaching of John the Baptist. As we will see next week, John's ministry served to prepare the way for the public ministry of Christ. He came preaching repentance and

forgiveness, so people might be ready for Jesus. In this sense, John's ministry can be described as the beginning of the gospel.

Then there is also the sense in which verse one functions as a heading or title for Mark's entire Gospel. In this sense, Mark is saying that his Gospel is only "the beginning" of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel does not end when the book of Mark ends. It continues to be proclaimed and to bear fruit all over the world, as the Spirit of God applies Christ's saving work in the lives of the elect. The gospel that Mark proclaimed is the same gospel that you have heard and received; the same gospel that brings you light and life and salvation.

And then there is also the likelihood that Mark is using the word "beginning" to point back to the very first verse in the entire Bible, Genesis 1:1, which introduces the creation account with the phrase, "In the beginning." The fact that Matthew and John also begin their Gospels with allusions to the creation account add to the probability that Mark, who was himself a Jewish Christian and would have been quite familiar with the first verse of the Hebrew Bible, was saying that the gospel of Jesus Christ is nothing less than an account of new creation. Here, in this proclamation of Jesus Christ, is where the world is being remade. The life and work of Christ is the source of new life for fallen men and women and boys and girls.

And this is why Mark described his account of the life of Christ as a “gospel.” You may know that this word means “good news.” A gospel is an announcement about something that is exceedingly good. But Mark did not invent this word. It was used in both the Greco-Roman world in which he lived and in the Hebrew world in which he was brought up. In the Greco-Roman world, the term ‘gospel’ was used to describe “an historical event which introduces a new situation for the world.” (Lane) It was often used in official pronouncements about the Roman Emperor, especially during celebrations of an emperor’s accession to the throne, or of a great victory, or of the day of his birth. For example, one ancient inscription describes the celebration of the Emperor Octavian’s birthday by saying that Octavian’s birth was “the beginning of joyful tidings” for the whole world. Of course, such proclamations were really just examples of political spin, kind of like someone today saying that the day of Barak Obama’s birth marked the beginning of a new and glorious age for the American people. In the first century, there were many people for whom the Emperor’s rule was anything but good news. But the point is this: to the ears of those who lived in the Roman Empire, Mark’s use of the term ‘gospel’ amounted to a claim that his message about Jesus Christ was something utterly momentous; that the events that took place in the life of this man brought about an entirely new situation for all the peoples of the earth.

And there is also an OT background for Mark’s use of the term “gospel.” It is derived from the same root as the verbs used in the passage that we read from Isaiah 40. In those

verses, Isaiah prophesied about the announcement of the good news that God is drawing near to pay for his people's sins and to bring them salvation. By affixing his book with the title of "Gospel," Mark was saying that Isaiah's prophecy had reached its fulfillment. The long-expected salvation had finally arrived.

And this is another reason why the four Gospels are so much more than biographies. As Gospels, they proclaim the life and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus as good news. Jesus was a historical figure, but he is a historical figure who is proclaimed as the only hope for all sinful people across the entire span of history. Jesus is not merely one example among many for us to emulate. He is not just another moral teacher. He is the way, and the truth, and the life; no one can come to the Father except through faith in him. That is what the gospel proclaims. As Calvin puts it,

“[W]e cannot take the right road to [Christ] unless the gospel goes before us. And there, surely, the treasures of grace are opened to us; for if they had been closed, Christ would have benefited us little.” (*Institutes*, 3.2.6)

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news because it tells us what Jesus' life was all about. It interprets the life of Christ for us, and it applies it to our lives as well. Without this proclamation, the life of Jesus would mean nothing to us. The gospel is everything to us, because Christ is everything to us.

You may know that Jesus' identity as our Savior is also declared in his name, the name that the angel commanded his parents to give him. 'Jesus,' which is the Greek version of the Hebrew name 'Joshua,' literally means 'Yahweh is salvation.' But it is interesting to note that the name Jesus was also one of the most common names given to Jewish males in the first century. This indicates that the people of that time were seriously looking for Yahweh's long-promised salvation. And this is the great irony of the Gospels. When that salvation came right into their midst, took up residence with them, performed wondrous signs among them, and even proclaimed that he himself was the salvation they were looking for, they could not see it. All three of the main groups in Mark's Gospel – the disciples, the crowds, and the religious leaders – failed to understand Jesus. And many people today fail to understand him as well.

Mark also declares that Jesus came as the Christ. Christ was not a last name, but a title. It is the Greek version of the Hebrew title 'Messiah.' Mark was making a very strong statement in proclaiming Jesus as the Christ. He was saying that Jesus was the anointed king from the line of David, the king whom God had promised to send to establish his kingdom forever.

But Mark does not stop there. He wants us to know that this King is a king that has no equal. He is the "Son of God." He is a divine being. And for the Jews, whose Scriptures

so strongly affirmed that Yahweh is the only true God, this meant that Jesus is identified with Yahweh. Mark makes the same point again in 1:3, where he cites an OT text to explain John the Baptist's ministry: "Prepare the way of the Lord." In the original Hebrew, this text reads: "Prepare the way of Yahweh." John came to prepare the way for Jesus, but Mark describes John's ministry by quoting a verse that talks about preparing the way for Yahweh. Mark's point is very clear: he is saying that Jesus is Yahweh. Jesus is God. (By the way, this is a great verse to point out to a Jehovah's Witness to show them that the Bible very clearly teaches the unique deity of Christ.)

Jesus' identity as both fully man and fully God is an absolute essential for the gospel. The gospel would not be good news if Jesus was not both fully man and fully God. This is the case because only as God incarnate, only as God in the flesh, could Jesus serve as our mediator with God. He had to be a man in order to be able to represent us; and he had to be God in order to overcome our fallen nature while serving as our representative.

The gospel is God's good news for our salvation. But it is only good news to those who truly understand why they need to be saved. In the words of Alexander Whyte,

"If it is in the power of man or woman to heal the break in your heart, then you do not need to go to Christ, and He does not need to come to you...But if sin has broken your heart, and sin only, then yours is a clear case for Christ, and for

Christ alone...[Christ] does it all for us, and we receive it all from Him. We bring the sin, and He brings the salvation. We bring the poverty, and He brings the riches. We bring the broken heart, and He brings the healing. We bring the captivity, and He brings the deliverance... We bring the mourning, and He brings the joy... The short and long of it is this – it is all sin and misery on our side, and it is all free grace and full salvation on His side. Till no wonder that all your eyes are fastened on Him. No wonder that you are all bearing Him witness, and are wondering at the gracious words which proceed to you out of His mouth.” (*The Walk, Conversation, and Character of Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 119, 122-3)

And no wonder that Mark’s account of the life of our Lord is so breathtaking. No wonder that Mark humbly describes his Gospel as merely “the beginning” of the gospel of Jesus Christ. These sixteen chapters really are just the beginning. No one will ever be able to plumb the depths of this gospel. But one thing is sure. If you are one who truly possesses Jesus Christ by faith, then you have a new beginning that will never end.