

“And So John Came . . .”

The Second in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 1:1-8; Isaiah

To the people of Israel, it seemed as though heaven’s door had been slammed shut. Malachi, the last of Israel’s prophets had spoken forth the word of the Lord 400 years earlier. God had been silent ever since. Israel was an occupied nation—Roman troops were stationed within a city block of the Jerusalem temple, where YHWH dwelt with his people. The current ruler of Israel, Herod Antipas, was loyal to Rome and indifferent to the plight of his own people. The Sanhedrin (the religious leadership) was deeply divided. The Sadducees—the theological liberals of the day—were pro-Roman. The Pharisees were anti-Roman, and while theologically conservative, had buried the Old Testament law under a pile of legalistic tradition. The Israelites, by and large, regarded the Pharisees as self-righteous hypocrites. Then there were the zealots, the political radicals who were plotting a rebellion against Rome. There were also weird religious sects, like the Essenes, who retreated into the desert thinking that this is where YHWH’s final glory would be manifest. It was in the midst of this very chaotic time when everybody expected *something* to happen that a bizarre figure named John the Baptist appeared out in the wilderness of Judea, a man who looked like Elijah and spoke like a prophet. His message was dramatic and powerful. *“After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

We are continuing our series on the Gospel of Mark and we turn to the first eight verses of this gospel—likely the first gospel to be written. Last time, we covered a number of introductory matters. We saw that Mark’s Gospel is closely tied to the preaching of the Apostle Peter. Mark did not set out to give us a biography of Jesus, but to proclaim the good news about Jesus of Nazareth. Mark’s proclamation is vivid and rapid-paced, and recounts many of the things that Jesus said and did to save us from our sins. Mark wrote his “action” gospel so that it might be proclaimed in the churches, that it might provide basic instruction in the Christian faith, as well as provide materials for Christian worship. This gospel—written by Mark in Rome about the time of Peter’s death at the hands of Nero A. D. 64/65—would have provided great comfort to Christians who found themselves facing an increasingly hostile Roman empire. But make no mistake about it—Mark’s purpose in writing is to proclaim the good news about Jesus Christ and all who hear this good news are summoned to faith and repentance.

Mark’s Gospel opens with a thirteen verse prologue (introduction), which tells us what the good news which follows will be about. It contains a title (v. 1) and short three episodes—the appearance of John the Baptist (v. 2-8), and the baptism and temptation of Jesus (9-13). We will cover Mark’s account of John this morning and the baptism and temptation of Jesus next Sunday.

Most people in the first century could not read which explains why the gospels were composed to be read aloud in the churches. To fully grasp the message of Mark, you ought to listen to it read aloud at least once. From a literary perspective—the Gospel of Mark is a story after all—the prologue (or introduction) of Mark functions much like the first two chapters of the Book of Job. Mark, the narrator, gives the hearer of his gospel a heavenly perspective on what is about to follow in the ministry of Jesus—a perspective which the hearer has even as the story begins, but which the various characters in the gospel

do not have, and struggle to gain such a perspective as the story unfolds.¹

Mark begins by introducing us to John the Baptist—the forerunner of the Messiah—and then to the gospel’s central character, Jesus of Nazareth, who we will learn is both Israel’s Messiah and the Son of God. The appearance of John out in the wilderness of Judea, followed by Jesus’ submission to John’s baptism of repentance, followed by forty days of temptation in the wilderness, are all described in such a way as to tell us that something utterly remarkable has happened—something so remarkable that the news Mark is about to proclaim will change everything Mark’s reader/hearer understands about God’s plan of redemption and God’s purpose for his people. This news will summon us to believe and repent.

Recall that the prophets Isaiah and Malachi had both foretold that immediately before the messianic age would dawn, two dramatic things would happen. A forerunner (or herald) of the Messiah would come and prepare the way for the Messiah. Shortly thereafter, the Messiah himself would then appear and come to his temple (in Jerusalem) to announce that God had provided the means by which the sins of his people might be forgiven. As Mark’s proclamation about Jesus unfolds, we (the reader/hearer) know what the crowds, the disciples and the religious leaders of Israel do not know—with the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness, closely followed by the appearance of Jesus, that which God had promised through the prophets Isaiah and Malachi had come to pass. In the prologue of Mark’s Gospel, we have the essential clues which enable us to understand what will follow in the balance of Mark’s proclamation about Jesus.² The first thirteen verses of Mark sets the stage for everything else.

With that, let us now turn to the Gospel of Mark. Mark’s Gospel opens with a one verse heading for the entire gospel—“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”³

There a number of things in this short heading which should immediately jump out at us. When Mark speaks of “the beginning,” he is referring to the beginning of the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, which will be the specific focus of the proclamation which follows. This “good news” or “gospel” begins with John’s preaching and baptism of repentance but extends all the way to the end of Mark and to the account of our Lord’s death and resurrection. From the way this opening sentence is constructed, it appears that Mark simply cannot wait to begin the account of Jesus of Nazareth!⁴ Mark jumps right in and gets going. There is no lengthy introduction. This brief, direct and dramatic style is typical of Mark’s Gospel.

When Mark speaks of the gospel “as good news” he may have been the first to apply this term to the specific content of Christian preaching which eventually became identified as a unique literary genre—a gospel. The background of the term “good news” (evangel) is interesting and important to understand so

¹ R. T. France, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT, 59. Cf. David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey and Donald Michie, Mark As Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

² Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 33.

³ France, The Gospel of Mark, 50. For the case that verse 1 is an introduction to the prologue and not to the entire gospel, see Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 33-34; and Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 42.

⁴ France, The Gospel of Mark, 51.

as to make sense of why Mark used this particular term in regard to his proclamation about Jesus. In the first century world, the term “gospel” was used of “good news” such as the enthronement of a new ruler, or an emperor’s birthday.⁵ To use the term “evangel” as Mark does, certainly picks up on the idea that what Mark is about to proclaim is the best of all good tidings, the most important all of possible news—the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth means that God has done something which will bring about a radically new state of affairs, not only for God’s people, but for the entire world.⁶

While Mark’s readers/hearers often make the connection to the Greek word “evangel” (“good news”), it is easy to overlook yet another aspect of this term—the very important Old Testament background to the idea of declaring the good news of what God has done in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. In Isaiah 40:9, for example, YHWH, speaking through the prophet declares, “*you who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’*” The Hebrew verb *bissar* means to bring good news—as it does in Isaiah 40:9. The LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) uses the word *euangelidzo* for the Hebrew word and appears as both a noun (good news) and a verb (to announce good news).⁷ Isaiah foretold of a time when a herald (a messenger) would come and announce the good news to God’s people that YHWH was establishing his rule. The good news is that God’s people would be delivered from their enemies and the oppression that these enemies had inflicted upon Israel was about to end. This is what salvation meant to someone in Isaiah’s day—deliverance from a fierce and oppressive enemy. Isaiah sees a time when such deliverance will be proclaimed to God’s people, and Mark ties that message of deliverance to the words of Jesus which he will now proclaim.

So, all of this is in his mind when Mark speaks of the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Through the message which is being announced in the words of this gospel, God will bring to pass the very thing he has promised—the extension of his rule (kingdom) and deliverance from our enemies. Only this time, the message of deliverance entails deliverance from our three great enemies, the world, the flesh and the devil. In other words, when Mark proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ so as to inform us that the good news of salvation is at hand, God will use Mark’s proclamation about Jesus to create faith in the hearts of God’s people, to call his people forth in a New Exodus,⁸ to establish his rule in the midst of the nations, as well as call his people to repent of their sins.⁹ The proclamation of the good news creates the very reality it announces. This is why the *Second Helvetic Confession* (article four) tells us that the preached word of God is the true word of God. When the good news is proclaimed, God gives new life to those who were dead in sins, hence salvation truly comes to the people of God through the words of the gospel.

⁵ Martin, Mark, Evangelist and Theologian, 22-24; Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 35-37..

⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 43.

⁷ See the discussions in: France, The Gospel of Mark, 52; and Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 35.

⁸ See Meredith G. Kline, The Structure of Biblical Authority (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 186-187.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 43.

Having told his hearers what this proclamation is about—the good news about Jesus—Mark introduces his audience to the first main character in the story, John the Baptist. It is the appearance of John in the wilderness which is the beginning of the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, which subsequently unfolds in Mark’s Gospel. With the coming of John, the good news first proclaimed to Israel through the prophets, now is proclaimed to God’s people everywhere.

In verses 2 and 3 of Mark 1, Mark announces that the good news of God’s rule and salvation began when the prophet Isaiah foretold of the great event Mark will now proclaim to the people of God. *“It is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—a voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”* Mark combines a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 and from Malachi 3:1. Both of these prophets—Isaiah being one of Israel’s most significant and widely known prophets, as well as Malachi, the last of Israel’s prophets—speak of a herald who will come at the time of the dawn of the messianic age and who will announce to Israel the coming of the Messiah. That time is now at hand. Everything in the Old Testament pointed to this.

At the time Mark wrote, the Jews considered Isaiah 40:3 to be a reference to a time when exiles from distant lands would finally return to Jerusalem. As we read in verses 2-4 of Isaiah 40, part of our Old Testament lesson,¹⁰ *“speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.’”* The prophet Isaiah (as did Malachi) foretold of a time of preparation in the wilderness for the Messiah, whom Malachi predicts will come to his temple shortly after he is revealed. In Luke 3:39, we learn that when Jesus was only twelve years old, he was in the temple for three days going about his father’s business. Isaiah sees this as a time when glorious news is announced to God’s people. *“And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.’ A voice says, ‘Cry out.’ And I said, ‘What shall I cry?’ ‘All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.’ You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, ‘Here is your God!’”* Mark is telling us that Isaiah’s prophecy is coming to pass when the good news about Jesus is proclaimed.

We should also notice that behind the words of both Isaiah and Malachi is the declaration in Exodus 20:23—*“See, I am sending an angel ahead of you to guard you along the way and to bring you to the place I have prepared.”* These words were spoken to comfort Israel while in the midst of the wilderness and the “angel” mentioned here is clearly a reference to the Angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ.¹¹ Mark, then, uses these blended verses from the Old Testament—cited at the beginning of his gospel—to call our attention to several very important things. The first of these is that herald or messenger of whom Isaiah spoke is John the Baptist, the voice calling in the desert. The second point is the location where John appears, the desert, (or wilderness), the same place where God met with Israel.

¹⁰ See the discussion of this in: Rikki E. Watts, Isaiah’s New Exodus in Mark (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 82-84.

¹¹ France, The Gospel of Mark, 64.

And the third point Mark is making is that the coming of the Lord (Jesus of Nazareth) is necessarily connected to the appearance of John in the wilderness.¹² When the messenger (or herald, or forerunner) appears in the wilderness, Jews knew that this meant that the Messiah is not far behind.

As for the first point, when Mark mentions the voice calling out in the desert (wilderness) he means that Isaiah was predicting the coming of John the Baptist, a new Elijah, who is the embodied voice whose preaching actually prepares the way for the coming of the Lord. John's preaching will level everything in the Messiah's way—a symbolic way of speaking of John's call for Israel's repentance and his announcement that messianic judgement is soon at hand in the person of Jesus. John the Baptist is clearly the long-anticipated Elijah whom the prophets said would come as the herald of the Lord, so as to prepare a way for him. If John is Elijah, then the coming of the Lord is at hand.¹³

Second, the voice (John's preaching) is heard out in the wilderness of Judea, the very same place where Jesus will be baptized and tempted by Satan. The wilderness was loaded with redemptive historical signification—as we have just seen in our recent series on Israel's time in the wilderness. This was the place where YHWH met with his people and revealed to them his law. This was the place where Israel was tempted and failed. This is where Israel lived on heavenly bread. This is where God's people were tested and learned to walk by faith. This is where Elijah will appear—and indeed has appeared.

This expectation of God's glory being manifest in the wilderness explains why the sect of the Essenes (the Qumran community—who kept the documents we now know as the Dead Sea Scrolls) moved out into the desert overlooking the Dead Sea. They hoped that this was the place where YHWH would return, and that when this happened, they would be found faithful. While the Essenes were weird and missed a number of things, they were right about this. When John the Baptist—the long awaited Elijah—appears in the wilderness, Mark is clearly making the point that this is the place where a new beginning for the people of God would first be manifest. The wilderness is therefore symbolic of hope and fulfillment.¹⁴ Thus it is not accidental in Mark 6:34-44 that Jesus feeds the 5000 in the wilderness. Jesus (the Angel of the Lord) not only fed Israel when they wandered through the Sinai, Jesus will feed his people with words of life in the New Exodus, which begins when Jesus calls us to faith and repentance.¹⁵ Third, and closely related to the preceding, the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness is the critical sign that the coming of the Messiah is likewise soon at hand. Just as the Angel of the Lord led Israel through the wilderness, so too, Jesus will lead us through the wilderness of this age. The coming of Elijah guarantees it. For Mark, all of these things are intimately related. This is where the story begins.

Having made the case that the beginning of the good news is the message that the prophets proclaimed to Israel, and is now fulfilled in the proclamation to follow, Mark describes the ministry of John.

Let's be candid. John the Baptist is a weird and mysterious figure. He stands at the end of the Old

¹² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 46; cf. France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 64.

¹³ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 39.

¹⁴ France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 58.

¹⁵ Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark*, 178-179.

Covenant and at the dawn of the New, which is why Jesus can say of him in Matthew 11:11, “*I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*” John’s appearance and diet are a bit odd and he is quickly superceded by the Messiah whose ministry completely eclipses his own. His imprisonment and plea to Jesus—if you are the one who sets the captives free, why am I in jail?—to his ultimate fate, beheaded by Herod at the behest of the daughter of Herodias as recounted in Mark 6, renders John a transitional and perplexing figure. In verse 4 of his prologue, Mark simply says of him, “*And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*”

That Mark intends us to understand that John’s coming is in accordance with God’s purpose in Scripture is clear.¹⁶ John is the new Elijah—Mark has already made that point by citing the relevant passages from Isaiah and Malachi. In verse 6, Mark tells us that “*John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*” While we hear this description and think of some religious zealot dressed in rags carrying a sandwich board with a sign which says, “repent, the end is near,” any Jew in Mark’s original audience would have made the immediate connection between John’s appearance and the prophet Elijah. According to 2 Kings 1:8, “[Elijah] *was a man with a garment of hair and with a leather belt around his waist.*” Mark is not telling us that John was weird, but that John was Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah. John looked like Elijah, ate like Elijah (locusts are still eaten by Bedouin of the region), probably smelled like Elijah, and certainly spoke like Elijah. The point is that when Elijah (John) appears in the wilderness the Messiah’s coming is at hand.

John did two very specific things which are addressed in verses 4-5. John preached repentance to Israel and he baptized in the Jordan River for the forgiveness of sins. According to Mark, “*the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.*” There are a number of redemptive historical themes here and we have time to but briefly summarize them. John’s baptism in the Jordan was a sign to Israel that God was about to dispense covenant blessings and mete out covenant curses.¹⁷ John’s obvious ties to both the wilderness and the River Jordan—both important places in Israel’s history—directly connects him to Israel’s entrance into the promised land (blessing) and indicates that something new is brewing. Indeed people flocked to see him and hear John preach because this connection was obvious to them.

It was John’s mission to summon Israel to repent—to forsake their sins and turn back to God—as well announce to Israel that the era of the Old Covenant was coming to an end in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God’s forbearance toward Israel was over. The people of Israel must repent of their sins and submit to John’s baptism (the graphic sign that repentance had issued in forgiveness). John’s baptism is symbolic of both Israel’s journey through the Red Sea and their entrance into Canaan (Joshua 3). God will save his people through a trial by ordeal, symbolized by this baptism in water. Water consumed the unbelieving world in the days of Noah and drowned the armies of Egypt. But this same water was the means by which God’s people were delivered. All who submit to John’s baptism are acknowledging their sins and their need to turn back to God (except Jesus who take John’s baptism only to identify with God’s people since he has no sin). John’s entire ministry tells us that this was the last chance for disobedient Israel to return to YHWH. Indeed, once the Messiah comes, it will be too late to repent.

¹⁶ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 47.

¹⁷ See the discussion of this in Meredith G. Kline, By Oath Consigned (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 61-62.

Judgment is already at hand. Time is up.

In effect, then, John the Baptist is God's covenant prosecutor, announcing to Israel that their covenant breaking and sinful behavior must stop or else the ultimate covenant blessing and curse (eternal life or eternal punishment) will be pronounced. When John appears in the desert, heaven's door has opened, God is speaking once again and therefore it is time for Israel to repent and receive John's Baptism, or else face covenant curse. This can be seen in verse 7, where Mark summarizes John's preaching. "*And this was his message: 'After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'*" John is merely the herald. He calls Israel to repent and can only baptize in water. But the Messiah who will come after him, will baptize in the Holy Spirit, the great sign that the end of the age was at hand. This baptism in the Holy Spirit is a theme we will take up next time.

There are three things Mark's proclamation about John says to us as the people of God.

The first thing to consider is that God keeps his promises. We have hammered on this point, time and time again, but there is a reason for this. We will never be able to trust God in those times when our lives turn to vinegar, if we don't keep God's track record of faithfulness before our eyes. If the story of redemption tells us anything, it tell us is that God does what he says he will do. He keeps his promises! Therefore, we can believe his promises even when we cannot see how anything good can possibly come from our present circumstances. And then there is the fact that both Isaiah and Malachi lived hundreds of years before Jesus and John and their prophecies about the messianic age are fulfilled in exacting detail. This not only means that God keeps his promises, it means that his word is true. When these prophecies are fulfilled, we know that the Bible is the word of God and its promises are altogether trustworthy.

The second thing to consider is that in Mark's day, there were rumblings in Israel that events out in the wilderness meant that Elijah the prophet had come. The dark clouds of impending judgment upon Israel were everywhere. God was about to speak again. And when he does, the good news about Jesus of Nazareth, proclaimed by his messenger Mark, will create the very salvation the message promises. Thus Mark's implication is that the preaching of the gospel creates faith. It is not the preaching of the law which does this. It is not the telling of clever stories by ministers, or the giving of personal testimonies by sincere Christians which creates faith. It is the preaching of the gospel which does this! And when God creates faith in our hearts, we will not only embrace the truth, we will desire to live lives which are pleasing to God. Faith in God's promises (faith in Christ) issues in repentance, or the turning away from sin. It is the declaration of the good news of God's rule and salvation which creates faith in our hearts and brings about our repentance—all of which means that God's rule has been established.

Third, since we so easily take all of this for granted, we need to ask the question, "what if John had not come? What would our situation be?" For one thing we would still be in our sins. We would not have a New Testament and as Gentiles we would be, as Paul says in Ephesians 2, "*separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.*" At best, our religious life would center around a temple in Jerusalem and an order of priests. It would all be so very bloody and incomplete. Worse, we would still be waiting for God to speak, and we'd all be wondering, "why doesn't God keep his promises?" There would be no answer to this. But the beginning of the good news, beloved, has been proclaimed to us by Mark. "*And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*" God has spoken, God has kept his word. And of this we can be sure.