

The Beginning of the Gospel

Mark 1:1-8

- 1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
- 2 As it is written in the Prophets:
“Behold, I send My messenger before Your face,
Who will prepare Your way before You.”
- 3 “The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord;
Make His paths straight.’”
- 4 John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.
- 5 Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.
- 6 Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.
- 7 And he preached, saying, “There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.
- 8 I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Mark 1:1 says, **"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."**

I wonder if I was to ask you the question: where did the Gospel begin? What would your answer be? Maybe your answer would be: 'Well, it begins with the Nativity, the Son of God being conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary, and then born in Bethlehem's manger'.

The problem with that is that Mark doesn't have a nativity story - yet he has taken it upon himself, as verse 1 says, to write **"the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ."** Mark begins the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the story of the ministry of John the Baptist.

Mark's purpose as we said last week, is to set forth the Lord Jesus as the Servant of the Lord. It appears that Mark is impatient to launch into his presentation of the earthly service of the Lord Jesus to God and to all of mankind. Look at chapter 1: he very briefly tells the record of the ministry of John the Baptist in little more than eight verses, Jesus' baptism gets three verses, His temptation just two verses. Just a brief introduction so that Mark can get to the record in verse 14 and following of Christ's ministry on the earth.

Mark giving us an account of the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, takes us back to the Old Testament. The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ did not just begin when Jesus was conceived and born, it began in eternity past in the mind of God. And God communicated it to His servants the prophets.

Mark gives two quotes from the Old Testament, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Where does the Gospel begin? The Servant of the LORD begins in Old Testament prophecy. Mark calls in two witnesses, the prophets - Malachi and Isaiah. We will see in this account of verses 1-8 that he also calls up to the stand John the Baptist as another witness to the identity of the Servant of the LORD. Next week, in verses 9-13 we find that he also calls up the Father and the Spirit to witness as to who the identity is of this Servant of the LORD.

Mark, remember, is writing to Gentiles. Mark knows that if Gentiles are to look at the story of Jesus and see Him as the King, the Son of God, then they will expect there would a herald who would announce His arrival, because that's exactly the way it was in their world. No king ever arrived and said, "Hey, I'm the king and I'm here." The king always had a forerunner.

These prophecies of Malachi and Isaiah go together perfectly and they both refer to the same person. Mark records Malachi as saying, **"Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You."** Actually under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Mark applies the messenger of the Lord to John, and implies that Jesus, the one he is preparing for is the Lord Himself. Then he quotes Isaiah, **"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.'"** John is the herald of the Lord, preparing the way. So the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ starts with the ministry of John the Baptist, who is the fulfillment of Isaiah and Malachi's prophecies.

Jesus points to John as the beginning of the preaching of the Kingdom of God in Luke 16:16, **"The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it."** In Acts 1:21-22 when Peter gives the qualifications for the apostle to replace Judas, he says, **"Therefore, of these men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John to that day when He was taken up from us, one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection."**

In Mark 1:14 we read, **"Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.'"** So then, how did the Gospel begin in John the Baptist, and what was his message? I want to give you the answer to those questions under two headings - first of all: John's life was an illustration of the Gospel; and secondly: John's preaching was an articulation of the Gospel.

1. John's Life was an Illustration of the Gospel.

Now John the Baptist, we could say a lot about him from the accounts of Matthew, Luke, and John. We could talk about the fact that he was miraculously conceived because his parents were too old and had been barren. We could talk about the fact that he was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. We could talk about the fact that he was a relative of Jesus, that Mary and Elizabeth were cousins. We could talk about the fact that he was the culmination of Old

Testament prophetic history, the last prophet and there hadn't been one for 400 years. We could talk about the fact that Jesus said, Matthew 11:11, "**among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist.**" We could detail his preaching to different groups of people, but Mark leaves all that out.

Mark's point is simple: John the Baptist lived, in his life, the message of the Gospel. He was a witness to Christ and to the Gospel by his lifestyle, and that is one of the senses in which he begins the beginning of the Gospel of Christ.

a. The Location of his ministry, the Wilderness.

Take, for instance, where he had his ministry - verse 4 says "**John came baptizing in the wilderness.**" William Hendrickson wrote a very graphic picture of what the wilderness was in those days: 'John was preaching', he says, 'in the wilderness of Judea, a term indicating the rolling badlands between the country of Judea to the West and the Dead Sea, and the lower Jordan to the east... It is indeed a desolation, a vast undulating expanse of barren chalky soil covered with pebbles, broken stones and rocks. Here and there a bit of brushwood appears with snakes crawling underneath'. Another person wrote: 'It shimmers in the haze of the heat, the limestone rock is hot and blistering, and sounds hollow to the feet as if there was some vast furnace underneath. In the Old Testament it is sometimes called 'Jeshimon', which means 'the devastation'

Why the wilderness? William Lane writes, "The summons to be baptized in the Jordan means that Israel must once more come to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to exercise separation. The people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. As the people heed John's call and go out to him in the desert, far more is involved than contrition and confession. They return to a place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God's beloved Son must be reestablished in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness signifies the acknowledgment of Israel's history as one of disobedience and rebellion, and a desire to begin once more."

b. The clothing he wore, camel's hair and a leather belt.

Secondly, his life illustrates the Gospel in the clothing that he wore - verse 6, "**Now John was clothed with camel's hair and with a leather belt around his waist.**" Just like Elijah in 2 Kings 1:8, and of course Elijah was expected by the Jews to be the forerunner of Messiah. The prophecy came to John's parents before he was ever born that he would minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. He identified with Elijah from the get go. That's why he wore what he wore. That's why he lived the way he lived. He lived against the grain of the culture. He even ministered near where Elijah did. But here is Mark's point: when you looked at John the Baptist, you weren't reminded of the fashionable orators of the day but of the ancient prophets. Here he is, calling the people out into the wilderness to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

c. The food he ate, locusts and wild honey.

His home, his clothing, thirdly his food - verse 6 **"he ate locusts and wild honey."** Locusts, crickets, or grasshoppers were the one insect that Jews were permitted to eat according to Leviticus 11. It might not sound very appetizing, but it was allowed - maybe it was better with wild honey on it. Why does Mark tell us what he ate? It was of the simplest food imaginable. Now, think of his home, think of his clothing, think of his food, and all that is being conveyed here by Mark. John the Baptist subordinated these things which are so basic, yet so important to us in our lives - home, clothing and food - he subordinated these personal things to the glorious task of making Christ and the Gospel known.

He chose to be poor. And he became a fitting herald of Him who had no where to lay His head. What was the result of this lifestyle that illustrated the Gospel? Well, it's found in verse 5, **"Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins."** There was steady stream of people who kept coming out to John in the desert to be baptized. It wasn't every citizen in Jerusalem and Judea came out and was baptized - no, but generally there was a widespread acceptance and an embracing of the ministry of John and his preaching. All classes, we know from the Gospel, came out - in Matthew 3 the Pharisees and the Sadducees, some of them went out to hear him; in Luke 3 the publicans or tax collectors went out; in Luke 3 again, verse 10, the rich and the poor were there; Luke 3:14, the soldiers went out to listen to his preaching.

Why was he so successful in his ministry? Well, obviously, the main reason was that it was ordained of God. He was the fulfillment of this prophecy of the one who would prepare the way of the Lord. And he was able to do that because his life paralleled his message. In other words, John the Baptist was a walking Gospel, and his whole life illustrated it. How different we are! How different I am! We talk about sacrifice, we talk about giving to Gospel causes, but perhaps we just go on our merry way living in the luxuries that everybody else lives in, without any inconvenience for the cause of the Servant of Jehovah. Not John the Baptist, and I think that was one of the reasons that people listened to him.

Do we, as Christians, go against the trends of the day to make a point for the sake of the Gospel of Christ? That's what John the Baptist was doing. John's clothes, his food, his lifestyle was a call, literally, to separation: 'Come out!'

d. The Attitude he had, humility.

Fourthly, one other factor that illustrates the Gospel - not only his home, his clothing, his food - was his humility. As the Sun of Righteousness rose on the horizon of Israelite history, John, the North Star who was guiding folk to Christ, eclipsed. As Jesus came on the scene, John disappeared. Humility. In John 3:30 John the Baptist speaks these immortal words: **'He must increase, but I must decrease'**. John never pointed to himself, he always pointed to Jesus.

Kent Hughes in his commentary makes the point of how John embodied the message that he preached, and he quoted referring to 1877 Yale Lectures on

preaching that were given by Phillip Brooks. When Brooks was lecturing he gave this foundational definition of what preaching is, *'Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come through the person, not merely over his lips, it must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him'*. He goes on to quote Bishop Quayle who said almost the same thing by asking the question: 'Is preaching the art of making a sermon and delivering it?', to which he answered, 'Why, no! That is not preaching, preaching is the art of making a preacher and delivering that'.

John the Baptist was a living sermon that God delivered to Israel. E. M. Bounds put it like this: 'It takes 20 years to make a preacher, because it takes 20 years to make a man'. John, from his mother's womb, was filled by the Spirit of God. He was a Nazarite from birth, totally committed to God - what a message!

2. John's Preaching Articulated the Gospel.

Secondly let's look at the Baptist's preaching - how was he the beginning of the Gospel in his preaching? Well, his preaching, I believe, was an articulation of the Gospel. Malachi 3:1 spoke prophetically of him, Isaiah 40:3 - Malachi says he was a messenger, and Isaiah 40 said he would be a voice. The significance of that is that for 400 years after the prophet Malachi, before we come to Matthew's Gospel, there was no voice from God - God did not speak to the nation of Israel. Now John would be that voice in the wilderness coming to prepare the way for the Son of God.

Here we have an illustration that people would have understood: John the Baptist is coming, preparing the way of the Lord out in the wilderness, living like an Old Testament prophet; and he's now communicating that he wants to prepare a way in the hearts of the men and women of Israel for the Lord coming. Now how did he do it? We see how he depicted it, but how did he actually do it? He did it through his preaching. His preaching was an articulation of the Gospel.

a. He preached repentance.

Verse 4, it's a baptism of repentance that he is administering. Repentance is a change of heart that results in a changed life. To demonstrate their repentance they would be baptized. The baptism didn't bring forgiveness of sin, it only declared their intention. The Jews had ceremonial washings, but they had no baptisms except for proselyte baptism. Gentiles converted to Judaism, they were ritually washed from their defilement and uncleanness. So by being baptized a Jew would be saying, "I'm no better than a Gentile. I am no more ready to meet the Lord than a Gentile." That is a huge admission for the Jews who had been trained pretty much to resent and hate all Gentiles.

John's baptism pointed out that all people need repentance, everyone, Jews and Gentiles. Why do we need to repent? Because our sins need forgiven.

b. He preached remission of sins.

'Remission' simply means 'forgiveness' or 'sending away', sending away sin. In other words, John the Baptist was encouraging the people to see their need of

forgiveness, and to see that they could not achieve forgiveness themselves, and then to point to how that forgiveness could be obtained. He's preparing the way for the Lord, preaching remission of sins.

c. He preached Christ.

He preached remission of sins, he preached repentance, and then in verses 7 and 8 he preached Christ! How else could we see that his preaching was an articulation of the Gospel except in this very point: the pure Gospel is Christ! John the Baptist did not magnify baptism. I believe, of course, in believer's baptism - but that wasn't the theme of his message. He baptized, but the theme was Christ! He magnified Jesus Christ. John preached Christ. How did he preach Christ?

- John preached Christ's preeminence.

Verse 7, **"And he preached, saying, 'There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose.'"** That was the lowest possible job that any servant could have. That was it. That was the bottom. If you were the servant who untied your master's sandals, you were the scum of the scum of the scum...dirty feet. Old quotes from Hebrew sources, "A Hebrew slave must not wash the feet of his master nor put his shoes on." That's beneath the dignity of a Hebrew slave. Another one, "All services which a slave does for his master, a pupil should do for his teacher with the exception of undoing his shoes." John says I'm below the people who do that. I'm not even up to the level of those who would untie His shoes, that's how low I am.

- John preached Christ's power.

He says, **"I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."** Literally, 'I immersed you in water', externally cleansing you. But He will come and immerse you with the Holy Spirit, cleanse you from within to without. John could only prepare their hearts, Jesus has the power to mend them. He pointed to Christ, pre-eminent, powerful. He pointed to His promise, that He would baptize them with the Holy Spirit - and we know from John 3 that this was the new birth, we know from Acts chapter 2 that in the Day of Pentecost it was realized in the birth of the church and the coming of the Spirit. His promise came true! John preaching this gospel, the preeminence of Christ, Christ's power, Christ's promise, and also - though it's not found in Mark - Christ's passion.

He preached the cross. In John 1 we hear the Baptist saying, verse 29 and later on, 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world'. He knew the basis for the remission of sins was the shedding of the blood of the Lamb. So, in John's life we see the beginning of the Gospel illustrated through his lifestyle. We see it articulated in his preaching. John is always pointing people to Christ.

Is that what your life does? Does the way you live and the things you say point to Jesus?