

**Mark:  
The Beginning of the Gospel**

**Mark 1:1-8**

**By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)**

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Now this evening we begin a new series of sermons on the Gospel of Mark that should take us at least through spring and possibly into the fall of this year. We're returning, after considering the Gospel of John last year, we're returning again to another gospel. But we've just sung those words, "I love to tell the story," and we're back to the story of Jesus and of the gospel, and we can't hear that enough. Now our reading this evening comes from the first chapter of Mark's gospel, and we're reading verses 1 through 8. Before we read this passage, let's come before God in prayer.

Our God and our Father, we pray now as we bow in Your presence for the blessing of the Holy Spirit upon that which is read and proclaimed. Come, Holy Spirit, and illumine our hearts and our minds, and enable us to understand that which we read, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Hear the words of God.

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 AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY; THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.'" John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Amen. And may God bless to us the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

This is not really a biography of Jesus, is it? Mark begins his gospel immediately

when Jesus is thirty years of age. He's going to introduce us in this section this evening to John the Baptist, but next week we'll be in Jesus and in His public ministry. He calls it "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's meant, I think, to remind us of the opening of the book of Genesis. It's amazing how many times in the New Testament we're reminded of those opening words of the book of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." There was possibly a reflection of that in the text we were considering this morning from 1 John. Mark wants us to remember that the Bible begins with a story of creation, but the gospel begins with a story of re-creation. In the Old Testament, there is the story of paradise lost: Adam is in paradise and sins and is driven into the wilderness. Here in the Gospel of Mark, we begin in the wilderness with John the Baptist, next week with Jesus in the wilderness and the last Adam is in the wilderness, but He's going to bring us into the paradise of God. Paradise is going to be regained by the last Adam.

We'll have occasion to point out something of the unique style of Mark. Mark is always in a hurry. Mark will make you breathless. Mark likes to use the present tense a lot. He has little time for the kinds of details that Luke is interested in. He wants to tell us the story, and he's in a hurry to tell us the story. And the story, as he tells us in last chapter—it's almost the last verse of the Gospel of Mark—he tells us that Jesus was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. This is the story about a King. It's the story about the enthronement of the King of kings and Lord of lords, and a King is preceded by a herald, and the herald's name is John.

### **John the Baptist, the messenger**

Now Mark tells us a number of things about John, about him as a person, but also about his ministry. Let's look in the first place about the messenger, John, John the Baptist. The first thing that he wants us to understand about John the Baptist is that he was the fulfillment of a promise. Mark's been reading his Bible. I wonder if you made a promise at the beginning of the New Year? I try to make one every New Year. There's not necessarily anything biblical or spiritual about it, but it at least gives me the occasion to reflect on where I stand in my relationship with Jesus Christ. And I think every year I want to make the promise that I want to know the Bible better than I do.

Well, Mark is telling us he knows his Bible. He's quoting. If you have a Bible that actually indents quotations, it's much easier sometimes to see that he's actually quoting. He's quoting from a variety of places. Even though he tells us that this is Isaiah, and indeed some of it is Isaiah, like many in the first century in Mark's time, the quotation is actually a conflation of many texts: one from the book of Exodus, chapter 23; another from Isaiah, chapter 40; but another from the last book of the Bible, Malachi. He's been reading the whole of the Old Testament. And as he begins to write the story of Jesus, he wants us to understand that

Jesus didn't just appear by happenstance. No, God had promised the appearance of Jesus. And John the Baptist comes by promise, because God's promise with regard to Jesus was also a promise that He would be preceded by a forerunner. The quotation from Malachi is at least 500 years old, for Mark that is. The citation from Isaiah, from the 40th chapter of Isaiah, is some 700 years and more old. And the quotation from the book of Exodus is 1200 years. God is not in a hurry to fulfill His promise. God is not in a hurry to do His work. And don't be in a hurry for God to do His work in you.

### **John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness**

The first thing then is that He was the fulfillment of a promise. The second thing is that he appears, you note, in the wilderness. In these opening verses, the term "wilderness" occurs four times. The reference in the book of Exodus that Mark is actually citing comes from a period of time when the people of God were in the wilderness. They were on their way to the land flowing with milk and honey; they were on their way to Canaan; but they were actually in the wilderness. And God, you remember, promises to send before them an angel to go ahead of them and to bring them into the place of promise. The Isaiah passage is speaking to a people of God who will find themselves in Babylonian captivity, in a wilderness.

The Malachi text comes from a period of time when the people of God have lost their way. It's a call to repentance. "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God," Isaiah had said, and Malachi is saying something similar. As the people of God were facing the ravages of Assyrian and Babylonian and Persian and Roman occupation, the Lord will suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant. "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner's fire." That's the message of Malachi, and Mark is now citing that in relation to the coming of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ.

John the Baptist is in the wilderness because he's preparing the way for the One who will be driven into the wilderness. You note that the very next verse, in verse 9, "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized." And then down in verse 12, what happens after the baptism of Jesus? We'll be looking at it next week. He is immediately driven, you note, "into the wilderness." John is in the wilderness because the people of God are in the wilderness. And Jesus when He takes up His office in His public ministry will be driven by the Spirit into the wilderness, because the last Adam has come to bring the people of God out of the wilderness and into a restored paradise. He's the fulfillment of promise.

### **John the Baptist's appearance**

He appears in the wilderness, but then, in the third place, Mark makes a

reference to the appearance of John the Baptist. Now by any stretch of the imagination, John the Baptist was one weird looking person. I don't think he would've received a call to any of the big steeple churches in the PCA. He wore strange clothing: camel's hair, probably hair that had been got from thorn bushes and then weaved into some sort of material, a belt of some kind.

And then a reference to what he ate: locusts and wild honey. The wild honey I could take but not the locusts. He's a strange character. There's a mimicking in his character of the figure of Elijah. When you read the narrative of Elijah in 1 Kings, you see something of the way John the Baptist is mimicking Elijah the prophet, the prophet who was to appear. Malachi had spoken of the appearance of an Elijah-like figure preceding the coming of Jesus. This is John the Baptist. His appearance in the wilderness was meant to identify not only his message, but to identify his person with that message. When the people of God, the people of Judea that is, came to him, they said, 'We've been sinful rebels, and we want to begin again.' When they saw him, when they heard his message, everything about him was saturated with this notion that he was a prophet and a forerunner and in the wilderness preparing the way for the coming of Messiah.

### **John the Baptist was a herald**

And one more thing about John the Baptist that Mark notes, that is that he was a herald. He was a voice crying in the wilderness. Pharaoh in Ancient Egypt made heralds run before Joseph's chariot in Egypt, you remember, to cry to the people, "Bow the knee!" Nebuchadnezzar's herald cried, "Fall down and worship the golden image!" Hezekiah sent heralds through the land saying, "Come to Jerusalem and keep the Passover!" And John the Baptist is one of the King's heralds. He's a messenger. He's a voice that says, "The King is on His way!" He's a herald, a man on a royal mission. II. John the Baptist's ministry — his message

Well, so much for the messenger. But Mark wants us to see now his message, what it is he did and what it is he proclaimed. And he tells us, firstly, that the most obvious thing about John was what he had to say about repentance. He came proclaiming, *proclaiming* a baptism of repentance. Now, he was also performing a baptism, but Mark says he was proclaiming it; he was preaching. He wasn't only baptizing; he was also preaching. The baptism and the message were focused on the theme of repentance. Great numbers of people were coming to hear him and to be baptized by him in the River Jordan, but it's the emphasis upon the message that went along with it. There was something of a revival. Do you note in verse 5, "And all the country of Judea...and all Jerusalem"? Now, there may be some hyperbole in that description, but by any stretch of the imagination, this is something deeply significant. We've never seen the like of this. When tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of people are trekking through the countryside to the River Jordan to hear this strange

preacher in the desert proclaiming not a message of health and wealth, but a message of repentance. And he's baptizing.

You know, baptism didn't actually begin in the New Testament; there were baptisms in the Old Testament period, washings, washing rituals. The book of Hebrews chapter 6 refers to "washing rituals"—in Greek as *baptisms*. These were ceremonial ablutions that symbolized the removal of sin and defilement. Those Essene folk, those strange folk in the Dead Sea Scroll period, that lived 250 years before the coming of John the Baptist and of Jesus, a separatist group that lived together in a community some 70 - 80 miles south of Jerusalem down by the Dead Sea—they had baptism ceremonies, rituals. Gentiles who wanted to become Jews, or proselytes, would first of all be ceremonially washed, *baptized*. Priests and Levites had their baptism rituals.

But there's something radically different here. Everybody, all these Jews in Judea and Jerusalem, were being baptized, and they were being asked to undergo this baptism no matter whom they were. They were being asked to undergo a ritual that symbolized a washing away of sin. Now baptism, of course, didn't actually do that. It was only a picture. It was a rite. It was a ceremony that said, 'Something inside, something internal needs to take place.' The rite itself is not enough. The ceremony alone will not suffice, no matter who performs the baptism. John didn't have the power to change the heart. It wasn't enough to be circumcised. It wasn't enough to be religious. It wasn't enough to be baptized. There must be something more than that. 'There must be repentance,' John is saying. 'Turn around. Turn to the word of God. Turn to the Lord. Turn or burn,' was John's message. Right in the very depths of your souls, in your thinking, in your affections, in your hearts, in the core of your being, in the way that you understand yourself, in the way that you think about God, in the way that you think about others—in every aspect there needs to be this change, this radical change, this turning.

There's a sense, of course, in which John's baptism has a very particular context. It comes after that 400-year period of silence and that period of spiritual declension. He was the forerunner of the Messiah after all. But there's a sense in which his words are for us too. When he says, "There is none righteous; no, not one," then he's speaking those words to me and to you, to the most respectable of people, to religious people, to church members. And John says, 'It has to become a matter of conviction. In many ways, that is the most important belief in my mind: that my life is wrong, that there's something radically wrong at the very core of my being, of my existence that needs to change. I need this radical re-evaluation of myself. That's what John is saying.

John is saying, 'It's not enough simply to have a burst of religious sincerity.' You know, to go into the desert and have a good cry...and be baptized and come home again and all will be well. No, there has to be a change of direction, and it begins with a confession of sin. 'Deep down in one's own heart,' John is saying,

'one has to cry, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner! My life is soiled. I'm a poor, wretched, miserable sinner and I need to be washed.'" John is saying, 'You need to be upset about your sins.' It's not a time now to be comforted and solaced. John is saying, 'You need to be shaken. You need to be convicted. You need to understand that things are not right between you and God.' That's what John was preaching. 'You may have your family and you may have your wealth, and you may have your business and you may have many privileges, but fundamentally something is wrong,' John was preaching. 'And it's your sins. It's the fact that you've broken God's law. It's the fact that God isn't in your thoughts and He's not in your heart.' And these people who went to hear John felt wretched and miserable as they listened to him preach. They were convicted, and they underwent this ceremonial rite of baptism, hundreds of thousands of them apparently from all Judea and all Jerusalem.

In Belfast in the 1920s, 1926 and 1927 in particular, there was a preacher, a very well known preacher. He was a little strange. He was a little tactless in his preaching. I've read some manuscripts of his sermons, and, to be honest, I think most of us would be deeply offended by some of the things that he would say. He would point out, from the pulpit, people's peculiarities and people's dress. He was notorious for it, but yet in some extraordinary way, God blessed his ministry. Hundreds of thousands of people claim to have been converted in that period, 1926 to 1927, in the shipyard. I was hearing just the other day that the shipyard in Belfast; which used to employ something like 150,000 people, is now closed. It's closed down. W.P. Nicholson was the name of this preacher, and he would go in there at lunchtime; he would have Bible studies; he'd preach them during their lunch breaks. And such was the sense of repentance that came upon the shipyard workers from his preaching, that things that they had borrowed from the company and taken home—bits of equipment, inventory—they brought them back. And the shipyard had to rent a building in the town in order to put all this stuff. It's true. It actually happened. There are pictures in the newspaper of this building and tens of thousands of people bringing stuff that they had "borrowed" from the company. They were under conviction of sin. John is preaching a message, a message of the holiness and the righteousness of God to prepare for the coming of Jesus, and they're under conviction. It's a message of repentance.

### **His message was focused upon Jesus**

The second thing about John's ministry and preaching was its focus upon Jesus. John was a voice but it was a voice that said, 'You're sinners!' but it was also a voice that proclaimed the coming of the Savior. You know, I suspect some people came to hear John the Baptist and they wanted to see him. They'd heard how weird he was, how strange he looked. You know, this was an age before television and newspapers and so on, and this, no doubt, was something that would interest thousands of people. This was the kind of stuff that curious people would go and see. And curious people, no doubt, went to see John the Baptist—

“What is all this going on here?” And they wanted to hear John the Baptist talk. They wanted to hear his voice and his accent and what he looked like.

And, no doubt, they wanted to hear him talk about himself...but he never talked about himself. He talked about God, and he talked about Jesus, and he pointed away from himself, and he said, “Behold! The Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.” ‘The One who comes after me is much more powerful and more important than me.’ He was unworthy to do even the most...the most menial of tasks in comparison to Jesus.

You know, it's like listening to a newsreader on CNN, on FOX or whatever. And the newsreader is reading the most solemn piece of news about a tragedy, and you make the comment, “Look at the strange tie that he's wearing.” No doubt people went to look at John because they were curious about him as a person, but what they came away with was his message. And it was a message about Jesus that pointed the way to Jesus. The man was a voice in the wilderness, and John was bringing a message, a message from God, as the servant of the King. You know, I suspect that after you'd listened to John preach you wouldn't be able to say anything about John, except what he looked like. You wouldn't know any more about him. He didn't preach about himself; he preached Jesus.

### **He proclaimed that Jesus would pour out the Holy Spirit**

Now what is it that John says about Jesus? You might have expected John to point to the cross perhaps and to preach a message about the forgiveness of sins. After all, he's preached a message about repentance. But, no, it's a message about the Holy Spirit. He says, “I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” That's his message. His message is to point to Jesus, but it's a message about something that Jesus is going to do.

And what is it that Jesus is going to do? He's going to baptize with the Holy Spirit. You see, without the gift of the Holy Spirit, the atoning work of Christ is ineffectual. Redemption needs to be applied, and only the Holy Spirit can do that. And so his message is about Holy Spirit baptism. It's about what's going to happen on the Day of Pentecost. It's a message that's saying, ‘Jesus is coming, but Jesus is coming in order to do something, and to do something extraordinary.’ And what is that? ‘To pour out the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. To pour it out in an effectual way, so that on the Day of Pentecost, everyone who is there receives the Holy Spirit. It's not just some people; it's not just the spiritual elite that received the Holy Spirit. Everybody, all believers, those who put their trust in Jesus Christ, every single one of them received the Holy Spirit. As a consequence of the resurrection and exaltation and ascension of Jesus to the right hand of God, He pours forth the Holy Spirit. He gives the Holy Spirit as the life-giver to those who are dead. He'll pour forth the Holy Spirit as the advocate, the paraclete, the comforter to those who are downcast and

sorrowful and who are in need. He'll pour forth the Holy Spirit as the sanctifier who makes us holy and draws us and molds us and shapes us after the image of Jesus Christ. He'll pour forth the Holy Spirit who will illuminate the Scriptures. He'll pour out the Spirit who will guide His people into all truth. That's John's message. That's the extraordinary thing John says about Jesus: 'He will pour out the Holy Spirit.'

### **His was a message of meekness**

But there's one more thing. Because not only was his message a message of repentance and not only was it a message about Jesus pouring out the Spirit, but the third thing was that John was to say something about meekness. He points to the glories of the coming King and he says, 'After me will come One who is more powerful than me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I'm not worthy even to do that.' You know, that was the most menial task you could ever perform. If a person had a personal slave in Mark's time, a personal slave wouldn't do that task. It was beneath the dignity of a personal slave to untie the thongs of someone's sandals, and John is saying, 'I'm not worthy to be less than the slave of this man.' John was a very great person. By any standard, he was a *great* person. He was the last of the prophets, but he says, 'Jesus is so much greater and so much more significant that I must decrease and He must increase.' "I must become less and He must become more."

And, oh, that that message...oh, that *that* message would come home to our hearts, that we would see something of the greatness of Jesus Christ, the glory of Jesus Christ, the kingship of Jesus Christ: that He is *so great*. He is *so big* that I'm not worthy just to undo His shoelaces. That He's so great. He's in a category all by Himself. You see, you can't...you can't pigeonhole Jesus Christ. He defies all of our categorizations. He's so big, I tell you. He's bigger than all the world because He's the King of Kings and He's the Lord of Lords. And John is saying, 'Are you ready for that?'

Mark is saying here, as he recounts the story of John the Baptist, 'You know, I'm going to tell you the story of One who is bigger than you've ever imagined Him to be. In all of your worship and in all of the songs that you've sung of Jesus, and in all of the thoughts that you've had of the exaltedness of Jesus—He's bigger than that. He's bigger than that. And, you and I, we're not worthy to undo His shoelaces. I wonder...I wonder tonight if you've ever seen Jesus in that fashion. I wonder if you've ever caught a glimpse of just how great and transcendent He truly is. May God give you that glimpse. May you bow the knee and acknowledge Him as Lord of lords and Kings of kings. Let's pray together.

*Our Father in heaven, as we begin now to open up the book of Mark, this wonderful, lively gospel of Jesus Christ, we pray, Lord, that we might catch a*



*glimpse of the greatness and glory of our Savior. Now bless Your word to us. Bless us this Lord's Day as we close it out. Help us to have great thoughts about You. Forgive us our sins, for Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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