

Mark's Gospel: We Begin in the Desert

Mark 1:1-13

TEXT: MARK 1:1-13

1 *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Mark has a way of getting right down to business. He does not begin in the beginning of all things, like John does. He does not begin with genealogical family histories or birth stories, as Matthew and Luke do. For Mark, the issue is the great news that comes from the ministry of Jesus in the last three years of His life.

We use the word “gospel” as a religious word. Stripped from its religious meaning, the word means, “the great news.” Jesus and the Apostles stole this word and made it the one that describes the message and work of Jesus on the earth. What Jesus had to do on the earth is “Great News” for the inhabitants of the earth.

Mark says, “The New starts here.”

He then identifies Jesus by two titles: “Christ” and, “the Son of God.”

Christ is a Greek rendering of a Hebrew term meaning, the Messiah, or the Anointed One. The Jews had been awaiting this Messiah ever since Moses said he'd be coming, 2000 years before. The prophets spoke of Him many times after that. Mark says, “Jesus is Him!”

Then He calls Jesus the Son of God.

“Son of God” is a radical title for anyone. The God who made everything, the earth, the planets, the stars and the universe and all that is in it . . . He has a Son? How can this be? In fact, 600 years after the writing of this Gospel, the false prophet, Muhammed, would found a religion based on the statement, “God has no son!”

If God has a Son He must be unique, and indeed Jesus is unique. How so? The title “Son of God” does not refer to being born of Mary. Mary gave birth to Jesus, the man, by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit of God conceived this human in Mary, but Mary is not the mother of God. She is the mother of a man. A woman cannot give birth to a God. She cannot give birth above her station and being. Jesus is a man when He is born of Mary, but He existed long before that as the Son of God, forever. Mary is neither the Queen of Heaven nor the mother of God. She is the blessed mother of Jesus, the man.

The Son of God is the same as God. If you are someone's son, you are made of the same stuff, and since the Father God had no beginning, neither did the Son. He has always been. It also means that He has all the attributes and powers of God. Now, there are not two Gods. The Bible is clear: there is One God expressed in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

So then, Mark jumps into his Gospel announcing to the Jews, “your Messiah is Jesus,” and to the world, “God has come to earth.”

The very next thing that Mark does is introduce the things that must happen before Jesus begins His official ministry on the earth. He begins with a strange, but important, man named John, the Baptizer.

2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way,

3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'"

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.

7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptizer is a big deal. How do we know? His coming was prophesied in the prophets, and he was to precede the coming of the Messiah, the Christ. His mission, according to the prophets, was to shout, to declare, and to preach. His message was simple: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight."

That language can make it sound like the Messiah needs some road construction done, that He doesn't prefer to walk on crooked roads with potholes. But that is not what is being referred to by "make His paths straight." In fact, it is not His path that needs to be straightened. Rather, it is the path in the hearts of the people of Israel that is crooked. The Messiah is coming. Are you ready? Get ready! If you are a Jew and your messiah is on the way, you are going to shape up! You won't just clean the house and put on your best sandals, but you will clean up your heart. You will lay aside your lying, stealing, sexual indulgences, quarrelling, your violence, your unfair business practices and any other sin you can think of.

The Messiah always walks straight –He never sins, He knows where He is headed. But will He find Jews whose hearts are ready to receive Him? It is the path to the heart that matters.

The same is true in all times, and this very day.

Jesus is coming straight at you this morning, but is the path to your heart straight? It's time to clean up your heart by getting rid of your sins of sex, drugs, stealing, violence, cruelty, lying, and whatever else. It is important to note that cleaning up your life and turning your back on sin is the decision you must make to receive the Messiah –But it is NOT the goal. One of the biggest misunderstandings about Christianity is that people believe it is about cleaning up your life. That's not so! It is about cleaning up so that when the Messiah comes, your heart is ready to receive Him. It is like a woman who cleans her house because a beloved guest is coming from far away, but then she doesn't let the guest in because she thought it was all about cleaning the house.

We repent so that when the Lord comes and asks us about our sins we can say, “Yes, I have these sins, but because I want you, I am laying them down!”

This is John’s ministry to Israel. Their Messiah is coming. They are to repent of their sins and get ready to receive Him.

Now, there are a few ways in which John is unique.

First, he doesn’t preach in town. There is a reason for this. He is out in the wilderness. Fred and I went to the place where he probably baptized, out near Jericho. Guess what? There is nothing there but lizards and sand. It is in the middle of the desert, nothing around. The only green you see is from the plants growing on the edges of the Jordan River. John preaches here. Why? It is an indictment on the religion of the Jews. Their great and learned religious leaders all taught in the Temple and Jerusalem, but when the Messiah comes, He spurns the Temple and sends His messenger out in the wilderness. This is a passive way of declaring that the Jews had polluted their own religion and made a way for sin and their religion to co-exist.

(This is no different than the Christian church throughout the ages. Many happily make it so that sin and religion can co-exist. There are priests, pastors and denominations that celebrate abortion, gay marriage and any sin of the culture, while also denying the doctrine of the Cross and of Judgement and Jesus as the only way to God. Such churches need to be abandoned for the truth is no longer in them.)

Another way that John is unique is that he has been a celebrity for his entire life. Though we may get the opposite impression from the Christmas celebrations, when Jesus was born, He came into the world with a whisper. Almost no one knew on the day He was born –his parents, their family living in the house in which he was born, and a few poor shepherds. That’s all. By contrast, when John the Baptizer was born, everyone in Jerusalem knew. His father saw an angel in the Temple, lost his ability to speak, and his wife, Elizabeth, had a baby beyond the age many thought possible. When he was born, all the people around Jerusalem knew his name and wondered what sort of man he would grow up to be. On the other hand, when Jesus was born, His parents slinked away to Egypt for a few years, and then took Him up to raise Him in an obscure little town in Galilee.

When John began his preaching ministry, he had everyone’s attention. They were waiting to see what God was doing with this man. They walked a long journey out of town to see him. And they saw a sight –long-haired, bug-eating, skin wearing, leather belt-toting, evangelist and prophet. Like the prophets of old, he didn’t come to say everything was alright. He came to say, “Everything is NOT okay, and you people better shape up.”

John was a great preacher. We know this because he had no trouble drawing a crowd. People came from all over, walking for hours in the hot sun, to get to where he was baptizing and preaching. His ability to hold his audience was clear. When he got done preaching, the people would come to him in the water and “confess their sins!”

(What a contrast with so much of the milk-toast preaching of our day, where we tell

sinners to come to God, forgetting to point out that they are themselves guilty of sin against God and in a state they should fear—one of impending doom. Today, no one confesses their sins because no one is supposed to “judge.” John preached and the people feared. They knew that their sin separated them from God, and they did not want to meet the Messiah without coming into that water, laying their sins aside, and seeking the forgiveness of God.

As for the water, it was a symbol for cleansing. There had never been a baptism just like this in the history of Israel, where Jews were coming to the wilderness and being dunked into the Jordan to be baptized.

Or was there?

A major theme in the story of the Bible is the salvation of the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt. The Old Testament speaks of God rescuing the Hebrews as a father rescuing His son and bringing him into the wilderness to make him his own. It was in the wilderness that Moses gave them the Law, the priesthood, and the tabernacle. It was in the wilderness that God punished their sins until the only ones left were the ones who were willing to repent of sins and walk with their God. And when He had prepared Israel, the nation that was His child, the people entered into the land, crossing the very Jordan River where John was baptizing and confronting Jericho when they got there. It is in the wilderness that God purified His nation, and so, John calls the people out to the wilderness again, and calls for them to repent of sin, for the salvation of God is near.

*9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.
11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."
12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.
13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.*

The Gospels of Mathew, Luke, and John give us many more details about what happened when Jesus came to see John, and when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness. Mark has no desire to relate all of those details. He is pointing out that Jesus, the Son of God, and the Son of Man, has come out into the wilderness too, in order to identify with us humans. Did He have sin? No. Did He need to be rescued from the slavery of sin (Egypt)? No. Did He need to be baptized? No. Why did He do these things? He did these things to show that He had come to join with us. He became a man with a mission, to get the same dust on His feet that was on ours. He came to feel this world as a human being. He came for us and to be with us. So, **though He had no need to repent, by being baptized, He showed that where it mattered the most, the removal of our sins, He was ready to lay down under the water for our sake. What was this except foreshadowing of the Cross, where the sinless Savior would lay down His life to take away the sins of the world?**

And He was sent deeper into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan. God the Son, as God, cannot be tempted. But Jesus is also a man now, and a man can be tempted. And again He is

identifying with us. We are tempted daily by Satan to sin, and we fail. But He bore the full force of all the temptation that Satan can bring, but He did not sin. He substituted His righteous life for our unrighteous one.

Finally, we see that God interacts with God at the baptism, demonstrating the importance of this moment and the ministry that it symbolized and the ministry that would follow. First, we see the Holy Spirit of God falling down on this man as a sign to John that this is indeed the Messiah. We hear the holy John declaring that, compared to this Man, John is but filth, not worthy of touching His feet. As if to verify this, the Holy Spirit of God, who is also God, comes visibly down and dwells upon Jesus. There is no friction. He is welcome in the soul of this man, for this Man is holy.

And if that wasn't enough, God the Father opens the sky and speaks. This is a very rare event in history. What would motivate God the Father to speak so that men could hear His voice from Heaven? It was an expression of acceptance, love, delight, and pleasure in His Son.

All three members of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Spirit, are here. The Father says, "I delight in My Son. I love My Son." By doing this, He lets us all know that God is pleased with the ministry that Jesus is embarking on. Jesus's work on earth is the very work of God.

Because He Loves,
God loves the Son.

Let's talk about the nature of God's love. It is of such a nature that all that He does is for the good of the beloved, including suffering. God loves Jesus. Jesus is going to embark on a journey that ends with Him suffering rejection, physical pain, a humiliating public death, and bearing the sins of the world on His own body. God's love is of such a nature that these works are for the good of Jesus, who would go to the shame of the Cross for the "joy that sits before Him."

But there is more. Jesus, the Son of God, became human and identified with us in baptism, in a holy life, and substituted Himself for us on the Cross, and He did this so that we could identify with Him in His resurrection. He identifies with us in our weakness, so that we can identify with Him in His glory. He raised from the dead in a glorified and perfect body, and so will we. He was raised to live forever in that body, and so will we. He was raised without sin, and so will we. He was raised to overcome the evil of this temporary age. and so will we. He was raised to inherit all things, and so will we. And now, the best part, He was raised to be loved by the Father and delighted in forever, and so are we.

The love of God for the Son is easy to understand –the Son is beautiful, loveable, holy, strong, and worthy of all love and praise. He is enjoyable. But me and you? Is it easy to understand why He loves us? If you have such a high opinion of yourself that you'd say, "Yeah, I can understand. After all, I am awesome," I'm afraid to say that you are likely going to be punished for your sin in Hell if you do not repent. But if you say, "No, I can't understand it. Like John the Baptizer, I'm not worthy to touch Jesus's shoe. How can I receive the same love of God?"

The answer is that the Son of God came to earth because God was motivated by love for the unworthy and the unwanted. The Cross is the highest proof of that love. That love began, not when you repented, but before you were born and before you were created. Consider these truths from God:

... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. (Rom 5:8-9 ESV)

And,

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins, ... among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ ... so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (from Eph 2:1-7)

And,

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. (1Jo 3:1 ESV)

Christian, you are loved far beyond your current understanding. He has loved you since before He made you. He surrounds you. He is in every molecule and every breath and everywhere, in front of you, behind you, beside you, and seeing to it that everything that happens to you is for your benefit –not because you are good –but because He chose to love you long before you were created. Don't be afraid for tomorrow, for whatever comes, be it hard or easy, His love is guiding and surrounding you.

You who have yet to repent of your sins and come running to Jesus, I cry out to you to make a straight path to your heart so that you are ready to be saved. Confess your sins to Him, all of them, and ask for Him to forgive you. Then, ask Him to come into your heart and be your Savior and God!