

# “A Wild Man by the River”

An Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

Mark 1:1-8<sup>1 2</sup>

One of the dangers of the preaching enterprise is that if we're not careful, we preachers can easily preach over and over on our favorite themes in the Bible while avoiding themes we may not like so much. Or we can emphasize the avoidance of particular sins and errors while allowing others to go unmentioned.

A phrase that is sometimes used to refer to balanced teaching of the Bible is “preaching the whole counsel of God’s Word,” and there are several ways in which I try to do this. One of my primary methods is to have an extended preaching plan that addresses a variety of Scriptural themes and issues. In other churches, I’ve sometimes preached a sermon or two through every book of the Bible. And sometimes I’ve done closer verse-by-verse work through a particular book.

From time to time, I like to work through one of the Gospels in a verse-by-verse fashion, since that causes us to engage the whole message of Jesus, and it prevents me from skipping over some of the more difficult things He taught us. It is to such a journey that we have now come, and the book we’re going to examine for a while on Sunday mornings is the Gospel of Mark.

For much of its history, the Gospel of Mark has been pretty much ignored. With only one exception, Mark never appears first in any list of the four Gospels, and it is not uncommonly placed last. Many across the centuries have considered it to be no more than a summary of the Gospel of Matthew, and so studying Mark was thought unimportant.

That all changed in the nineteenth century, when new methods of studying the Bible began to make it clear that, far from being insignificant, the Gospel of Mark was in fact the first Gospel to be written down, and that Matthew and Luke largely followed Mark’s example. In fact, there are only twenty-four verses in Mark that do not subsequently appear in either Matthew or Luke, and pretty much as Mark had written them.

William Barclay has gone so far as to say that Mark is “the essential gospel,” the nearest thing we’ll ever have to an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. In fact, Barclay argued, one could with good reason regard the Gospel of Mark as the most important book in the world.<sup>3</sup>

As I’m sure you know, each of the four Gospels has its own approach to recording the Ministry and Passion of Jesus. Mark’s Gospel is succinct, vivid, and unadorned, yet it is also both inviting and appealing. Mark recorded very little of Jesus’ teaching, such as The Sermon on the Mount. Mark was interested in the signs and wonders Jesus performed that demonstrated who He really was. Mark recorded nineteen of Jesus’ miracles, including eight miracles of power

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on September 11, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke. Digital Version.

<sup>3</sup> Barclay, xiii, xvii, xxi.

over disease,<sup>4</sup> five miracles of power over nature,<sup>5</sup> four miracles of power over demons,<sup>6</sup> and two miracles of power over death.<sup>7</sup>

Like the other Gospels, one way to understand the Gospel of Mark is to see it as a Passion Narrative with an extended introduction. Mark's purpose is to show why the events of what we know as Holy Week changed everything, forever. He also wants us to understand the various dimensions of the "so what" that follows Holy Week.

Now in order to understand any book or document, including those in the Bible, it is crucial to get as clear an idea as possible about who wrote the book, when they wrote it, where they wrote it, to whom they were writing it, and for what purpose. As you might guess, this is not always easy to do.

While the Gospel of Mark is officially anonymous, an early and unbroken tradition affirms that it was written by a man named Mark who was intimately associated with the apostle Peter in Rome prior to Peter's assumed execution there.<sup>8</sup> While we must acknowledge that the name, "Mark" ("Marcus") was as common among the Romans as William and Edward are among us, the tradition affirms that the author was the John Mark we know from the ministry of Paul, and scholars are generally in agreement with this conclusion.

After all, it seems unlikely that the authorship of one of the primary Gospels would be assigned to a person of secondary importance, who was neither an apostle nor otherwise prominent, unless there was good reason for doing this; and it may be that Luke gave us so much information about John Mark in the *Acts of the Apostles* for the very reason that he had already used Mark's Gospel in researching and writing his own.

Briefly, then, John Mark was a Jewish Christian whose mother, Mary, owned a home in Jerusalem where the nucleus of the original Christian community met. It was to this house that Peter came after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:12).

When Barnabas and Paul returned to Antioch after a visit to Jerusalem on a mission of famine relief, they added to their company a young man named "*John, whose other name was Mark*" (Acts 12:25). Since Barnabas was Mark's cousin (Colossians 4:10), it seems likely that Barnabas prevailed upon Saul to add Mark to their group.

Mark then traveled to Cyprus with Barnabas and Paul on a preaching mission to the synagogues of the diaspora (Acts 13:4), but when the trio turned to go inland to Asia, Mark abandoned the quest and returned to Jerusalem (Acts 13:13). As a result of this abandonment, Paul refused to take Mark along on a second journey, and Paul and Barnabas parted company in a bitter dispute.

We don't know everything that happened after that, but we do know that Paul was later reconciled with Mark, and that Mark was with Paul during one of his imprisonments in Rome. Mark also served as Paul's representative on an important mission to Asia Minor (Philemon 24; Colossians 4:10), and the last we know of him is that he was a coworker with Peter in Rome, where Peter regarded him affectionately as his "son" (1 Peter 5:13).

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<sup>4</sup> 1:31, 41; 2:3-12; 3:1-5; 5:25; 7:32; 8:23; 10:46

<sup>5</sup> 4:39; 6:41, 49; 8:8-9; 11:13-14

<sup>6</sup> 1:25; 5:1-13; 7:25-30; 9:26

<sup>7</sup> 5:42; 16:9

<sup>8</sup> The earliest sources include Papias, Eusebius, Irenaeus, the Anti-Marcionite Prologue, and the Muratorian Canon.

The situation into which Mark wrote was like this: within thirty years of Jesus' ministry, there had grown to be a significant Christian community in Rome. Not much attention was paid to them for quite a while, but that all changed in the year 64. During that year, a disastrous fire swept through ten of the fourteen wards of the city, destroying nearly everything.

Rumors quickly spread that the Roman Emperor, Nero, had caused the fires to be set in preparation for grand rebuilding of the city; and when his efforts to deflect these rumors failed, Nero badly needed a scapegoat. As still happens today, the "differentness" of the Christians made them an easy target, and a horrible persecution ensued in which Christians were sewn up in animal skins and thrown to wild animals to be eaten. They were crucified and set afire to light Nero's gardens in the evening.<sup>9</sup>

Things had become exceedingly grim and gruesome, and those Christians who had survived needed guidance and encouragement. So it was that Mark put together a document to meet that need, based largely on the things he had learned from Peter about what Jesus had said and done, and probably between the years A.D. 68-73.

When the believers in Rome read the Gospel of Mark, they found that it spoke quite elegantly to the situation of the Christian community in Nero's Rome. Reduced to a catacomb existence, they read of the Lord who was driven deep into the wilderness (1:12). The detail, which we know only from Mark, that Jesus was with wild beasts in the wilderness (1:13) was filled with special significance for those called to enter the arena where they stood helpless before such beasts.

In Mark's Gospel the Roman Christians discovered that nothing they could suffer from Nero was alien to Jesus. Like them, He had been misrepresented and falsely labeled (3:21, 30). And if they knew the experience of betrayal from within their circle of family and friends, it was sobering to know that one of the Twelve had also betrayed their Lord (3:19).

Mark's frequent use of the word "immediately" lends a sense of vividness and excitement to the action, and he is especially fond of using the present tense to describe past events. Mark employs this "historical present" over 150 times where other writers would have used the past tense. All of this served to put Mark's listeners "on the scene and in the action," and thus the Gospel of Mark may be a very early example of "virtual reality."

Well, with all this introduction, let's look for a bit at Mark's opening verses. Mark says quite a mouthful in his very first sentence: "*This is the Good News [gospel] about Jesus the Messiah [Christ], the Son of God.*"

You might know that the word, "gospel" or "evangel" didn't begin with Christians, and it didn't begin as a noun that describes a faith-based document. For the Romans, "evangel" had to do with good news about something that had already happened, such as a victory in battle or the birth of an heir to the Emperor. For the Jews, "evangel" had to do with the expectation of God's deliverance in the future. In both cases, the word referred to "an event that brings about a radically new state of affairs for humankind."<sup>10</sup>

When Mark used the word, "Christ" of Jesus, he was using the Greek word for the Hebrew word, "Messiah." "Jesus Christ" is not Jesus' first and last names. "Jesus Christ" means "Jesus, God's promised Messiah."

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<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44.

<sup>10</sup> Lane, p. 43.

When the word “gospel” was applied to God’s action in Jesus, it meant that the decisive and long-awaited victory over God’s foes had been accomplished. Jesus had fulfilled the hope of Israel, and a new epoch had dawned. The Good News was that God had visited the world in Jesus to defeat the powers of evil and to establish the divine rule.<sup>11</sup>

But when Mark wrote these words, the mighty Roman army was either about to or had already destroyed Jerusalem. Jesus the Messiah had come and gone, and the expected Golden Age had not arrived in any obvious way. In fact, Jesus had been crucified like a common criminal. So for Mark to say without either apology or irony that Jesus was the Christ, the fulfillment of Israel’s Hope, her Liberator, the One who had ushered in the reign of God and who reigns triumphantly at the right hand of God, was—and should still be—both startling and incredible.<sup>12</sup>

The shocking news that the crucified Jesus is in fact the Messiah, the Son of God, makes clear that God cannot and will not be confined by finite human expectations. The religious experts of Jesus’ day rejected Him because He did not fit their preconceived notions of what the Jewish Messiah would be or do. And are we all that different? Still today, we want a Messiah who does our bidding, wins our wars, destroys our enemies, and exalts us. Dare I say it? We want “America to be great again.”<sup>13</sup>

Mark’s very first sentence does, in fact, give us the essential outline of his entire work. The first half of Mark’s Gospel builds to Peter’s confession that Jesus is God’s Messiah (8:29); and the second half builds to the Roman centurion’s confession that Jesus is the Son of God (15:39). And so, in these first few words, Mark lets his readers in on secrets that will be largely hidden from the characters in the story to follow. Only a few of them will finally see Who Jesus is, and it will take them a long time to do so.

Mark proceeds at once tell us that what follows is the fulfillment of God’s Plan from the creation of the world: *“Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”*

With these words, Mark affirms that the Torah (Exodus 23:30), the Major Prophets (Isaiah 40:3) and the Minor Prophets (Malachi 3:1) have all foretold and now confirm everything he is about to tell. To our disappointment, perhaps, Mark has no interest in John the Baptist except as the forerunner of Jesus. We get no information about his origin, his parents, his miraculous birth, or the contents of his ethical teaching – but these are all details that the reader can find in Luke. In Mark, John is simply “the Baptizer,” who comes baptizing for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>14</sup>

The only thing that interests Mark about John’s preaching is his announcement that one who is more powerful than he is coming, One who will baptize with the Spirit. The long expected Messiah has come, Mark tells us, accompanied by the wonders and mighty works associated with Moses,<sup>15</sup> Elijah and Elisha,<sup>16</sup> and fulfilling the prophecies of Isaiah<sup>17</sup> and Jeremiah.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Turlington, p. 266.

<sup>12</sup> Garland, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Garland, p. 25.

<sup>14</sup> Garland, p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Testing in the wilderness, crossing the sea, feeding the multitudes

<sup>16</sup> Giving sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf

<sup>17</sup> Hardness of heart

<sup>18</sup> Destruction of the Temple; Culpepper, p. 24.

*“Someone is coming,” John shouted, “who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” (1:7-8).*

And so we’re off . . . .