

“The First Gospel: The Core of the Good News”

Mark 1:9-15 ^{1 2}

As we continue the launching of our study of Mark’s Gospel, we find ourselves still standing on the banks of the Jordan with crowds of curious folk from Jerusalem and the regions around it, listening to the powerful but strange words of John the Baptizer, the wilderness prophet. John is calling Israel to repentance, and then is baptizing the repentant in the river, and he has told us that someone even more powerful than he is coming soon.

Most of the persons being baptized don’t say anything to John. They just step up as next in line, and he baptizes them. But now a fellow comes to John and a fairly intense exchange takes place between them. John looks confused, but after a moment he baptizes the man. As the man comes up out of the water, a bird that looks like a dove lands on his shoulder, and we hear something that sounds like a peal of thunder. John looks at the man for another moment, and then moves on to the next person.

So goes the baptism of Jesus of Nazareth, John’s kinsman—perhaps his cousin—as Jesus begins His public ministry . . . but that’s a conflated account from all four Gospels. All four Gospels record a visible sign of the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus, but their accounts differ slightly as they record what happened.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) record a voice from heaven. John doesn’t make note of anything like that. And contrary to what may be our general impression, none of the Gospels actually tells us that anyone heard the voice except Jesus Himself—though several of the accounts sound as though others might have heard the Voice.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t give us any genealogies of Jesus’ parentage, no stories of angelic visitors, no night flight to Egypt. Unlike Matthew, Mark doesn’t record any protest from John about baptizing Jesus. The whole scene seems rather anticlimactic when we compare it to the “*baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire*” that John said was coming.

Most people who were there may not even have noticed anything different about Jesus’ baptism from the people in front and behind. We might have thought that the promised Messiah, the very Son of God, would make more of a “splash.”

We might also wonder why Jesus submitted to a baptism that was explicitly a baptism of repentance. As Very God of Very God, there was no sin of which Jesus needed to repent. There are several ways in which we might look at this.

First of all, repentance involves not only a “turning from” but also a “turning toward.” As Moses had given up his regal status as the Prince of Egypt to identify with the people of God, so He who had called all that is into being left Heaven’s glory and entered the realm of flesh and blood to lead us out of our slavery and into the Promised Land of the Spirit . . . and eventually into the New Creation.

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

² 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.

Jesus' baptism represented not only His identification with us, but also His settled decision to pursue the Great Divine Plan, set in motion before Creation itself, that would lead to His death and end in His exaltation. Jesus' baptism was also a powerful experience of affirmation, approval, and blessing, as both God the Father and God the Spirit confirmed and commissioned God the Son to inaugurate their long-planned invasion of Satan's realm.

Where Matthew and Luke record that the heavens were "opened," Mark tells us that the heavens were "torn open," and the difference is significant. What is opened can be closed; what is torn is not easily returned to its former state.

God came into our world without our invitation, and the Spirit who hovered over the formless beginnings of creation has now been set free in a new way. God is in our midst and on the loose.

It's important to remember that Jesus did not *become* the Son of God at His baptism. Jesus did not *become* the Son of God at His transfiguration. And Jesus did not *become* the Son of God at His resurrection. Jesus is, and has always been, the One in whom and for whom "*all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*" (Colossians 1:15-17).

But Jesus' baptism *was* the "starting gun" of the Great Invasion, the Great Reversal, the formal launching of the New Creation. The Father's Voice and the Spirit's Descent were the "clap on the back" and the "high five" that said, "Let's GO!" And then, "at once," "immediately," that same Spirit sent Jesus farther into the wilderness, away from the crowds, to do battle with the enemy He had come to destroy.

Mark's account of Jesus' "forty days" in the wilderness is much more restrained than the accounts we get from Matthew and Luke. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not report the details of Jesus' single combat with Satan in the wilderness; yet only Mark noted that there were "wild beasts" out there,³ with the implication that these beasts were allied with Satan in some way.⁴

As you probably know, the Bible uses "forty days" not so much as a literal number as shorthand for "an extended period of time." And you probably know that "Satan" means "adversary."⁵ Mark doesn't record the various ways in which Satan tried to distract and divert Jesus from pursuit of His Mission, and Mark doesn't record Jesus' victory over Satan in the wilderness, as Matthew and Luke do. This is perhaps because Mark intends for us to understand that Jesus was not done with Satan after this initial encounter. Satan does not give up easily. There was more to do.

Even so, Satan doesn't appear any more in Mark's Gospel, although Jesus has a number of additional encounters with the forces of Darkness. In all of these later accounts, though, every

³ See also Leviticus 26:21-23; Psalm 22:12-21, 91:11-13; Isaiah 13:21-22; Ezekiel 34:5, 8; Daniel 7:1-8.

⁴ Which is probably where Tolkien got a similar idea that he portrays throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. In the Old Testament, the wilderness is a barren and lifeless place where dwell only frightening creatures and death. And in the New Creation, the transformed wilderness will have no ravenous and dangerous beasts (Isaiah 35:9; Ezekiel 34:23-28).

⁵ Jesus would later tell us that "*I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven*" (Luke 10:18), and I'm inclined to agree with C. S. Lewis's conclusion that this planet is "Heaven's Alcatraz," that place, out of all the universe, where Satan's rebel army is imprisoned, but that's a story for another day.

one of the evil and unclean spirits recognizes Jesus for Who He Is and cowers before Him. Mark never leaves any question whatsoever about who is in charge of the unseen realms.

With Matthew and Luke, Mark recorded that angels attended Jesus after the combat had ended, much as angels provided for Elijah in the wilderness after his combat with the priests of Baal (1 Kings 19:5-7). The angels know who Jesus is, too.

The truth of the matter is that you and I find ourselves in the wilderness of life from time to time, too. Some of us may be in the wilderness with Satan and the wild beasts right now. But take heart! Our Lord has been there before you. He is with you now. And He knows the way Home.

Although Luke and John report the beginning of Jesus' public ministry immediately after the wilderness experience, Matthew and Mark appear to follow a different sequence. This is one of many reminders that none of the Gospel writers follows a strictly chronological outline.

Even a cursory examination shows that none of the Gospels makes any effort to chronicle Jesus' entire life. Perhaps John put it best: "*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. **But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name***" (John 20:30-31).

Mark begins his account much as John would later end his; and so the last two verses of Mark's prologue go like this: "*After John was put into prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'*" (1:14-15).

"*The time has come*" is a powerful statement. You may remember that the Greek language has two primary words for "time." The more common word, "chronos," refers to what we might call "clock time." The more powerful word, which is what Mark used here, is "kairos," which has to do with sacred time.

By using "kairos," Mark indicates that God is doing something very special: Jesus declares that the critical moment has come: God is beginning to act in a new and decisive way, bringing together all the past moments of promise in one awesome moment of fulfillment.⁶

In this "kairos" time, Jesus said, "*the Kingdom of God has come near.*" We can see in hindsight that the Kingdom of God would be the central theme of all that Jesus said and did, with this "Kingdom" referring to the New Creation where "*at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Philippians 2:10-11).

But it was obvious then, as it is obvious now, that God's Kingdom has not arrived in all its fullness and glory. The New Creation has not yet come to full flower, but the seed has been planted, and the harvest grows. Though no human realized it at the time, when Jesus was baptized and began to preach, the cosmos turned on its hinges. The heavens were ripped open. The Final Invasion had begun, and there would be no turning back.

It took the disciples years to realize what Mark has now told us in just fourteen verses, and the response we are to make is clear: "*Repent and believe the Good News!*"

⁶ Lane, p. 64.

I'm afraid that we don't understand repentance very well these days. After all, how long has it been since you heard someone say, "Yes, it was my fault"? News reports present us with litanies of dodges nearly every day: "It's not my fault"; "I did nothing wrong"; "I did nothing illegal"; "I misspoke": "Yes, but," "Yes, but," "Yes, but."

When was the last time you heard about anyone admitting to being in the wrong in a traffic accident . . . or anything else? It is a cruel irony of modern life that the only people who can be regularly relied on to accept—indeed, to *claim*—responsibility for their actions are terrorist bombers.

I'm afraid we tend to have a pretty shallow view of repentance. Rather like the flu shot I got on Friday, we've been exposed to a virtually lifeless repentance so often that we've become inoculated against the real thing.

But repentance is the single, inescapable requirement for God's forgiveness. Repentance is that act by which you and I, out of a deep awareness of our own sinfulness, and believing in God's mercy through Jesus, turn in sorrow from the Sin in our lives and turn to God with the commitment to live always and forever in grateful obedience to Him.

To truly confront the unredeemed areas that remain in our hearts to this very day is a painful experience. But the heart of Christian conversion—and of our continuing growth into the character of Christ—is to be willing to confront our own Sin and then to cry out for God's deliverance from it.

It's awfully easy for us—especially for those of us who are fairly regular in church attendance—to persuade ourselves that our own sins aren't really all that bad, and that the real problem in our world is with everybody else. Do you remember the conversation when Jesus was invited to dinner at the home of Simon the Pharisee in Luke 7? When a woman known for immoral living entered the room and poured expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, Simon thought to himself, "*If this man were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him.*"

Answering Simon's *thoughts*, Jesus told him, "*You neglected the courtesy of olive oil to anoint my head [when I came in], but she has anointed my feet with rare perfume. I tell you, her sins—and they are many—have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. **But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love***" (vv. 46-47).

As a Pharisee, Simon went about what he considered to be righteous living with a holy passion. He thought he was living a "squeaky clean" life, and that conviction made him bold about judging others. And, like Simon, you and I are basically decent people. We probably haven't broken the Ten Commandments in horribly obvious ways this week. But for us, as for Simon, **the secret of passionate love for Jesus is that we come face to face with our own Sin.** Our real problem, you see, is "Sin," not "sins."

Our root problem is not the offenses we commit, the good we withhold, or the attitudes we harbor. No, our real problem is that Sin is alive in us like an unchecked cancer. Our sins are symptoms of our disease; they are not the disease itself.

The Pharisees were into symptom management. They were clueless about the real darkness within. And Jesus said to them, "*If the light you think you have is really darkness, how deep that darkness will be!*" (Matthew 6:23).

Sisters and brothers, Sin is in our very character. Sin is in our thinking. Sin is in our feeling. Sin is in our . . . everything. Real repentance is not about making excuses. "Real [repentance] means looking steadily at [our] sin, the sin that is left over without any excuse, after

all allowances have been made, and seeing it in all its horror, dirt, meanness, and malice, and [crying out for the forgiveness] that we can always have from God if we ask for it.”⁷

On Calvary’s Cross, God looked steadily at our sin, our sin that is left over and for which there is absolutely no excuse, seeing it in all its horror, its dirt, its meanness, and its malice, and said to us, “*No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool*” (Isaiah 1:18).

Friends, the Good News is that you and I don’t face any situation that the Power of the Risen Christ cannot overcome; and you and I have not done anything that the Blood of Jesus will not cover—if we accept responsibility for having done it.

God never denies forgiveness to those who genuinely repent. What Sin needs to be removed from your life this morning? What habit needs to be forsaken? What do you hold in your hands or in your heart today that is blocking the power of God from flowing into your life, and then through your life into our church and into our town?

Like Simon, you’re probably a decent, respectable member of our community. And with Simon, that same decentness and respectability just may be blocking God’s power in your life. The Rabbis taught that “If a man has an unclean thing in his hands, he may wash them in all the seas of the world, and he will never be clean; but if he throws the unclean thing away, a little water will suffice.”

“The time has come,” Jesus said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:14-15).

⁷ C.S. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” in *The Weight of Glory* (HarperSanFrancisco: 1949, 1980), pp. 179-181.