

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-8

Key Verse: 1:1

“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Thank God for helping us to study the gospel of Mark! From today’s passage, we learn when and how the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ began. The gospel ministry began in the wilderness when John the Baptist accepted one word in his heart and preached the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. May God help us to learn how a gospel ministry can begin in and among us!

Look at verse 1. *“The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* Mark opens his gospel by declaring that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior, and the Son of God. He makes it very clear that the focus of his gospel is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The key verse of this book is 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” John Mark, the author of this gospel, was the son of a wealthy and faithful woman named Mary (Ac 12:12) who provided her big house for the meetings of the early church in Jerusalem. Mark was also a cousin of Barnabas, St. Paul’s mentor and coworker (Col 4:10). In his days as a young man, Mark apparently had an easygoing mentality before he was changed to a servant of God. He did not like suffering. He did not like serving others. He would run away from mission when things became difficult (Mk 14:51-52; Ac 13:13). But by the good influence of the apostle Peter, his spiritual father (1Pe 5:13), he learned about Jesus’ servanthship. Through our Mark’s Gospel study, we want to learn how Jesus served all kinds of sinners, until he gave himself on the cross. Another thing about this gospel is that it is action-oriented. Mark frequently uses such expressions as “immediately” or “at once.” Mark wants us to respond in action to the word of God as we study the gospel, instead of reading it passively.

So how did the gospel of Jesus Christ begin? Each of the authors of the four gospels has a different take on this subject. Matthew begins with Abraham the father of faith. Luke takes us all the way back to Adam the first man. John goes even further back—to eternity. But Mark begins with John the Baptist who was only a few months older than Jesus. He wants to get to the main point quickly. He starts by explaining how the coming of John the Baptist prepared the way of Jesus.

First, our God is the God of history. Look at verses 2-3. *It is written in Isaiah the prophet: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way--‘a voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.”* More than 700 years before John the Baptist was born, the prophet Isaiah had prophesied that a forerunner would come to prepare the way for the Lord, just like an advance team prepares a city before a presidential visit. John the Baptist came, as was prophesied, and prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance.

Why is it important for us to know that John’s coming was predicted long before? It teaches us that the gospel of Jesus is not a story that was conveniently made up by someone. The gospel is based on God’s promise. Our God is the God of history. He has a

track record. He works out his purpose through his promises. In the Old Testament, God is often called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. After the Great Flood, God called an old man Abraham and gave him a promise to bless him. All nations of the world would be blessed through him, God told Abraham. God had a long-term redemptive plan to bless the humanity by sending a Savior from the descendants of Abraham. It was an amazing promise to the old man with a severe family problem. But Abraham believed the promise of God and embarked on his long journey of faith. He lived by faith and he passed his spiritual legacy on to his son Isaac, who in turn lived by faith and passed it to his son Jacob.

There are many other examples of God giving his promise and keeping his promise. Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David were men of God who believed in God's promise and who experienced the power of God in their lives. In fact, to believe in God means to believe in his promises. God kept all his promises to his people in the past. So we believe that he will keep all his promises in the future as well, including the second coming of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, our ultimate home.

God gives promises to his people and he fulfills them. This is a process in history directed by God who sees the end in the beginning. And we are also in this process, and because of this, we can either help it or hinder it. For example, God needed a virgin in order to bring his son into this world as a human being. So he called a young woman named Mary. She accepted God's calling and obeyed God's will. She was used in God's history precious. Likewise, God calls us today not only to live a life of faith and be blessed, but also to advance the kingdom of God in the hearts of young people. When we accept his calling, we can be part of his history as kingdom workers!

Second, John preached a baptism of repentance (4-5). What did John do as the forerunner of the Messiah? How did he prepare the way for the Lord? He prepared the way by becoming a voice in the wilderness. He preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (4). John said to the people who came to him, "Repent your sins and turn to God!" If they repented their sins, John baptized them with water to declare publicly that they were ready to accept the Savior. His water baptism symbolized a cleansing. It prepared them to receive Jesus' cleansing of their sins through the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

How did the people respond to his message of repentance? Many people today get offended when they hear the words, "Repent your sin." Some might say, "It's none of your business." But without repentance, they cannot receive the forgiveness of sins. Were the Jewish people offended by John's message of repentance? No. Look at verse 5. *"The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River."* It is amazing to see that people from all over the country responded to John's message of repentance. They came to him and confessed their sins, beating their chests. We learn here that people really want to have their sin problem solved. Sin is enticing. Sinful acts satisfy us for a while. But we have to pay too heavy a price for such momentary pleasure. Sin separates us from God, the source of our life. Sin torments our soul through our guilt conscience. That's why people really want to be freed from the bondage of sin. When John told them how their sins could be forgiven, many people came and confessed their sins and were baptized.

So what does it really mean to repent our sins? Some people may think that to repent means to tell God they are sorry about the wrongs they did. But to feel remorse is only the first step of real repentance. The original Greek word for “repent” is “metanoeo” (μετανοώ) which means “to change your mind.” It means to turn around. It means that we admit we were headed in the wrong direction and we intent to change our ways to walk with God.

To understand more clearly about true repentance, let us compare Peter and Judas Iscariot. On the night Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane, both of them sinned against God. Judas betrayed the Lord with a kiss of death. Peter denied the Lord three times. Peter repented with tears when the rooster crowed. His changed life after Jesus’ death and resurrection was the evidence of his repentance. He no longer lived for himself. He wasn’t afraid of suffering for God. His life bore the fruit of repentance. On the other hand, Judas did not repent. He felt remorse about his betrayal. He went back to the Jewish leaders and tried to return the blood money. But he could not undo what he had done. Still he could have repented his sins before the Lord and asked for forgiveness. Sadly, he did not do that. Instead, he committed suicide. It was his pride. It was like thumbing his nose to God until the last moment of his life. His life ended in tragedy.

We learn how important it is to repent our sins when we still have the chance to do so. In his first message which we will study next week, Jesus said: “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mk 1:15). In his first message, St. Peter also said: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Ac 2:38).

Third, John lived a mission-centered life. Look at verse 6. “*John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.*” John the Baptist lived a very simple life as a servant of God. He lived in the desert. This sounds strange. There was no one in the desert. Why didn’t he start his ministry in Jerusalem? It was because he personally accepted the prophecy of Isaiah and became a voice in the wilderness. He did not live in a city where he could have a comfortable life. He was not a slave of desires for gourmet food and a house with impressive entertainment center. He ate locusts and wild honey, the food that was readily available around him. He wore a camel-hair garment, which served as an outfit by day and as a blanket by night. He lived a simple, pure, mission-centered life. His life was filled with the Spirit of God. His spirit paralleled that of Elijah (Lk 1:17).

Details of John’s life story are described in Luke’s Gospel 1. During the reign of the terrible king Herod, there lived in Judea a priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They were an old couple who obeyed the word of God faithfully. But they had one serious problem; they had no children. Amazingly, they had not given up having children even though Elizabeth was way past her menopause. They just kept on praying to God for a son. Amazingly, God heard their prayers and said to Zechariah, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John” (Lk 1:13). God also told them that their son would be the forerunner of Christ who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Lk 1:17).

I can imagine how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt when they held their son in their arms for the first time. Msn. Isaac and Mary had their son Little Isaac in their early 30's. They are so happy that they can hardly take their eyes off of their son. We can say that Zechariah and Elizabeth were beyond ecstatic about having a son in their old ages. Still they did not spoil their child. They taught him the Bible faithfully. They told him about the mission God had for him. When they studied Isaiah 40, John felt that God was speaking to him personally through verse 3 which said: "A voice of one calling: 'In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.'" He accepted this as his life key verse. And when time came, he went out to the desert to be a voice in the wilderness. No one goes to a desert to start a ministry, but John did, because of the Scripture.

So what happened in the desert? Amazingly many people came to him. John began his ministry in the wilderness. It wasn't an ideal environment for a ministry. But when he obeyed the word of God, God blessed his ministry. Let us not complain about our wilderness-like environment. Let's remember that a gospel ministry can begin when a person obeys the word of God.

Fourth, John introduces Jesus (7-8). Look at verse 7. *And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie."* Untying the thongs of sandals was a task for a servant at that time. John described his relationship to Jesus as a master-servant relationship. John had an enormous popularity at that time. Some people were even wondering if he was the long-awaited Messiah (Lk 3:15). But John humbled himself to the position of a servant in order to magnify Jesus as the Messiah. In fact, this is what he said about his relationship with Jesus: "He must become greater; I must become less" (Jn 3:30).

Look at verse 8. *"I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* John proclaimed that Jesus is God who baptizes people with the Holy Spirit, while he was a mere man who could only baptize with water for a symbolic cleansing. Why is it not enough to receive a water baptism? Why is it necessary to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit? It is because when Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit, we can be filled with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit convicts our hearts that our sins have been indeed washed away by the precious blood of Jesus. The Holy Spirit gives us true rest and joy. The Holy Spirit also empowers us to be witnesses of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us the spiritual power to live a life worthy of the calling of Jesus Christ. We all must be witnesses that Jesus is God who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus can save us from the power of sin and death.

This morning, we learned how the gospel of Jesus Christ began. The gospel ministry began with the coming of John the Baptist who accepted God's word in his heart and preached a message of repentance in the desert. It began when John lived a simple, mission-centered life and preached the baptism of the Holy Spirit by the Lord Jesus. Living in this modern society, we feel like we are in a kind of desert as well—a spiritual desert. Still, a gospel ministry can begin when one person accept the word of God and shares the good news of Jesus Christ with people who are still groping in the darkness of sin. Let us pray earnestly that each of us may be that person. May the gospel of Jesus Christ blossom on the SU campus this fall so that many young people may come to know the Savior personally!