

Lesson One

(Mark 1:1-16)

Background Notes

MADMAN OR SON OF GOD??? Who is Jesus Christ??? Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus was being interrogated by the High Priest, who asked him point-blank: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed God?” “I am,” answered Jesus, “and you will all see the Son of Man seated at the right side of the Almighty, and coming with the clouds of heaven!” (see Mark 14:61-64). The High Priest understood the claim Jesus was making. He tore his ceremonial robe, and declared: “We don’t need any more witnesses! You heard his wicked words.” There can be no doubt at all that Jesus made the claim to be God. This was the official charge placed against him by the Jewish leaders. “We have a law that says he ought to die, because he claimed to be the Son of God” (John 19:7).

The answer of the identity of Jesus Christ is at the heart of each of the four Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each produced a general account of the life of Jesus, each with his own special emphasis and added material. Matthew writes as a “preacher”; Mark as a “chronicler”; Luke writes as a “historian”; and John writes as a “theologian.” Matthew gives us a Jewish point of view, proving from the Old Testament portion of the Bible that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Mark gives us the Roman point of view, describing Jesus as “God’s Superman,” who demonstrates his deity by his miracles. He emphasizes what Jesus *did*, rather than what Jesus taught. He shows us the war of Jesus against sin and evil in the world. Luke writes “an orderly account” of the things that had taken place. He emphasizes the universality of the “Christ event” as it applies to all mankind, both Jewish and Gentile. Clement of Alexandria speaks of John’s Gospel as the “spiritual gospel.” John shows us The Word (Logos) who came down from the invisible God to reveal the Father to all mankind.

Scripture declares to us that Jesus is the Messiah -- the Lord from heaven! It is this statement of fact that makes it possible for us to know Jesus by faith. But how can we learn what Jesus was like when he lived here on earth as a human being? What was it like to be with him? How did he deal with difficult situations? How did he relate to people? The four Gospels give us the opportunity to know who Jesus is and what he is like. Each of the Gospels is a character sketch of Jesus, carefully detailed by someone who knew him (and who was inspired by the Holy Spirit). Only Matthew and John traveled with Jesus in his public ministry. But Mark and Luke drew on eyewitness accounts from Jesus’ first disciples. (And they were guided by the Spirit in their choice of material.) Each of the four Gospel writers knew Christ with a faith full of excitement and with a love that illuminates Jesus’ character forever in the Gospels!

When you have four “pictures” of a person, you can compare one with another, and get a clearer understanding of that person. Perhaps this is why God gave us four accounts. There can be no real doubt that Mark’s Gospel is independent of the others. He also gives us a valuable statement of God’s truth. As we compare the Gospels, we remember some things which Alexander Campbell said.

1. Not one of these four historians wrote with any design of improving upon the others, of detailing the things omitted by them, or of supplying any defects which he observed in their statements.

2. Not one of these historians relates all that he knew of Jesus, nor do they all relate as much as any one of them could have related concerning him.

3. These historians do not always aim at giving the precise words of those they quote, not even of the Savior himself; but only the full and precise sense of what was uttered or written. Campbell adds that Jesus certainly taught the same things many times and worked the same miracles many times. Also that the order of narration does not follow our modern plan of historic writings; but is similar to the Jewish or Oriental way of looking at things. All this helps to explain the “differentness” of the four Gospels.

The probable date for Mark to write is between 60-70 A. D. A statement by Papias (in the second century) has Mark writing at Rome, traditionally around the time of Peter’s death there. But this has been challenged by the discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls of what may be a fragment of Mark’s Gospel (*Bible and Spade*, Winter, 1972). This could push the date back as far as 35 A.D. Since Mark clearly wrote by inspiration, such an early date would pose no real problem. Peter has traditionally been identified as the source of Mark’s eyewitness accounts. There is a similarity in the way both word their statements. Compare Peter’s sermon in Acts chapter two. Peter gives a good summary of Mark’s Gospel in these words from Acts 10:38. “You know about Jesus of Nazareth, how God poured out on him the Holy Spirit and power. He went everywhere, doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.”

Mark was very likely the young man who “ran away naked” in Mark 14:51-52. Although not one of the “inner circle,” he would have known Jesus at least by sight, if not personally. His mother was Mary, an aunt (sister, KJV) of Barnabas (Col. 4:10). His mother’s home was such a center of Christian activity, that when Peter was released from prison, he immediately went there (Acts 12:12-17). Some think her house was where the apostles stayed just after the ascension (Acts 1:13), and some think the Last Supper was eaten in the “Upper Room” of her house. He was probably born in Jerusalem, and his Jewish name was “John.” “Mark,” his Roman name, gradually superseded the other (compare the change of Saul to Paul). The “John Mark” of Acts 12:12, 25, and the “John” (“John Mark” in some versions) of Acts 13:5, 13 becomes “Mark” only in Acts 15:39; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11; Phm. 24. He was a helper to Paul and Barnabas in their first tour of missions. Johnson thinks Mark did most of the actual work of baptizing people into Christ (compare 1 Cor. 1:14-17). Mark returned to Jerusalem before the first tour ended, and this became a problem (Acts 15:38-39). But this was worked out to Paul’s satisfaction (Col. 4:10). He was with Paul during the first imprisonment, (Col. 4:10; Phm. 24). Later we find him with Peter (1 Pet. 5:13) at Babylon. Still later during Paul’s second imprisonment, he seems to be with Timothy at Ephesus (2 Tim. 4:11). Tradition makes him the founder of the church at Alexandria, and says he died a martyr’s death in the eighth year of Nero.

Mark and the other Gospels cover much identical material, yet there are facts which prove we are listening to an independent statement. The outstanding characteristic of Mark is *realism*. He does not *idealize*, but presents the facts as they were, with all the “warts and wrinkles” that might appear. For Mark, Jesus is the *Jesus of history* and the disciples are simply disciples. Remember that Jesus is the Logos who *became* a human being (John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-4). Mark gives us the true human personality of Jesus in all its originality and power, and as colored by the time and the

place. Jesus is a *carpenter* (6:3) before he begins his public career. The Spirit *drives* Jesus into the desert at the temptation (1:12). When Jesus first appears in the synagogue at Capernaum, the people say, “What is this?” (1:27). Before daylight the next morning, he is up and out of the city (1:35-38). We see Jesus so involved with his mission that his family fears for his sanity (3:20-21). We see Jesus climax his teaching in parables by suddenly leaving the crowd (4:35-36). Toward his last days on earth, Jesus goes ahead of his disciples on the ascent to Jerusalem, and the disciples are alarmed and the people are afraid (10:32). Jesus promised the return of the colt ridden in the Triumphant Entry (11:3). But in everything, Mark is faithful to his theme: “This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1).

There are probably no more than twenty-four verses in Mark which are not paralleled, more or less exactly, in Matthew and Luke. Mark tells us: “The Sabbath was made for the good of man” (2:27); his family “set out to get him” by force (3:21); more detail in the healing of the Gadarene demoniac (5:1-20); some detail in the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the woman with severe bleeding (5:22-43); some detail in the calming of the storm (4:35-41); more detail in the healing of the boy with an evil spirit (9:14-29); “For everyone will be salted with fire: (9:49); that Jesus “would not let anyone carry anything through the temple courts” (11:16); that “The large crowd heard Jesus gladly” (12:37b); the command to watch and be alert (13:33-37); the young man who ran away naked (14:51); the conflict of the false witnesses (14:59); details about Simon who carried the cross (15:21); Pilate’s surprise that Jesus was already dead (15:44); the statement of the women about the stone (16:3-4).

Mark connects Peter with Capernaum (1:29); identifies Levi as the “son of Alphaeus” (2:14); tells Jesus named “Peter” (3:16); that Jesus called James and John, “Boanerges” (3:17); he names “Bartimaeus” (10:46); he mentions that Barabbas was part of a group of rebels (15:7). Mark also preserves words, phrases, and complete statements of Jesus which deserve to be examined: 1:15; 4:13; 6:31-34; 7:8; 8:38; 9:12; 39; 10:21-24, 30; 11:17; 13:32; 14:18-37; 16:7, 15-18.

Any controversy about the different endings to Mark’s Gospel has been solved by further discoveries. Over five thousand manuscripts have now been found. Of the most important ones, the Regius and Athos manuscripts give both endings. The Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus give the longer ending, and it must have been in existence at the close of the first century. Both endings are considered *authentic*, and all Greek Testaments since Westcott & Hort include both endings in the text.

The Preaching of John the Baptizer

(Mark 1:1-8)

1 This is the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 It began as the prophet Isaiah had written:

“‘Here is my messenger,’ says God; ‘I will send him ahead of you to open the way for you.’

3 Someone is shouting in the desert, ‘Get the Lord’s road ready for him; make a straight path for him to travel!’”

4 So John appeared in the desert, baptizing people and preaching his message. “Turn away from your sins and be baptized,” he told the people, “and God will forgive your

sins.” **5** *Everybody from the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem went out to hear John. They confessed their sins and he baptized them in the Jordan River.*

6 *John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist; he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He announced to the people, “The man who will come after me is much greater than I am; I am not good enough even to bend down and untie his sandals. 8 I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

If someone came up to you and said, “Bill Jones who lives next door is the Son of God” -- what would you say??? Probably, “Bill? I’ve known him all my life. We played together as kids. I went to his wedding. He’s just a normal guy like the rest of us.” That’s the same reaction people had to Jesus, and it points up God’s problem. How will Jesus be identified as the Messiah -- yet in such a way that our freedom of choice is not destroyed??? The Jewish leaders expected the Messiah to suddenly come with great power -- full-grown (see John 7:27). But God already had his Plan. Jesus the Messiah was born into the world (a miraculous birth) through a human Jewish mother. He grew to be an adult -- just as everyone does. The climax of his mission was to be the bloody death of the cross (Luke 9:31). Jesus had to demonstrate his identity so that we could believe in him, and he did this in his years of public ministry. God had spoken through the prophets of old, to give identifying marks so we could know the true Messiah when he came. Jesus fulfilled each of these prophecies. We believe because of the *facts* (see John 20:30-31).

But before Jesus could begin his work of public ministry, some kind of preparation had to be done. And here we see John the Baptizer. His work was that of “advance man,” laying the groundwork by calling the Jewish people to renewal! He came to those who were *already* God’s people (but disobedient), and called them to turn away from sin and return to God (the technical word is “repent”). His work was also one of the identifying marks, and Mark shows this by quoting the Old Testament portion of the Bible, John dressed like the ancient prophets (compare 2 Kings 1:8), and was a “Nazarite” from birth (see Luke 1:15). He lived off the land, eating locusts (a kind of giant grasshopper, Lev. 11:22) and wild honey.

John was noted for the fact that he *baptized* (immersed) people. He introduced a new *religious rite*. As representatives from the Pharisees were interrogating John, he was asked: “Why do you baptize?” (See John 1:24-25). John’s baptism was *water only* as a sign of repentance. It was for those who were already God’s people. Christian baptism is both *water* and the *Spirit* (John 3:5; compare Acts 19:1-7) and is an act of *new birth*. (Note how Jesus speaks in Acts 1:5, and how Peter gives God’s command in Acts 2:38. Compare Paul’s statement in Acts 19:4.) Even though John the Baptizer was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets (Luke 7:28), yet in terms of rank and privilege the weakest Christian is greater than he. (Yet don’t overlook the statement of Hebrews 11:39-40.)

The Baptism and Temptation of Jesus

(Mark 1:9-13)

9 *Not long afterward Jesus came from Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, and John baptized him in the Jordan. 10 As soon as Jesus came up out of the water he saw heaven*

opening and the Spirit coming down on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my own dear Son. I am well pleased with you."

12 At once the Spirit made him go into the desert.

13 He was there forty days, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals were there also, but angels came and helped him.

John had been preaching and baptizing for some six months, when we see Jesus come to be baptized also. Mark shows us Jesus apparently waiting in line like everybody else, and with everybody else. A strange way for the Messiah to enter the stage of history! The "Sinless One" shows he is willing to be a part of sinful humanity (compare Heb. 2:14-18). The visible form of the Spirit was probably for the benefit of the people there (compare John 12:30). The key to what took place at the baptism of Jesus is found in these words by Robert Brinsmead. "A thing cannot be a new covenant sign or seal if Christ as God did not give it. Neither can it be God's sign or seal if Christ as man did not also accept it from God and give God thanks for it." The baptism of Jesus *set the pattern* for him to be the first among many brothers and sisters (Rom. 8:29). We learn that this *event* was to be the mark of identification to show the one who was the Messiah (see John 1:29-34). In the same way, Christian baptism can be viewed as a mark of identification in which the Holy Spirit "seals" us to God (Eph. 1:13-14). God voiced his approval of Christ Jesus in a way which all those present could hear (1:11; compare 9:7; John 12:28). So it was Jesus the Christ, the Logos as a human being, who came both with the *water of his baptism* and the *blood of his death* (1 John 5:6).

At once following his baptism, the Spirit *made* Jesus go into the desert to spend forty days being tempted by Satan. This was no make believe, but a severe time of testing! The wild animals and the angels imply complete isolation from human contact during this period, yet under the eyes of a watchful Father. Even though Jesus did not *sin*, he experienced every kind of temptation which a human being may face (see Heb. 4:15). Some may argue that Jesus could not have faced such temptations as we have today, but this is incorrect. A little thought will show that there are no *new* temptations, but only the same old ones that the Devil has been using through the centuries. Jesus experienced to the fullest the entire human existence, *but without sin*. Further, he is our *Pioneer* who has already undergone both death and the resurrection from the dead!

Even though Mark does not directly state that Jesus defeated the Devil, it is obvious that he did (compare 3:27). The way Mark mentions the temptation implies that this event was a preparation or probation for the work of public ministry. Jesus battled the prince of evil personally, before beginning his war with sin, evil, and sickness in the world. (Of course, Satan continued to tempt Jesus up to the point of actual death. Compare 8:11; 10:2; 12:15; etc. All of this is part of *God's act in Christ* to set us free, as Paul describes it in Rom. 8:1-4.)

The Good News of the Kingdom

(Mark 1:14-15)

14 After John had been put in prison, Jesus went to Galilee and preached the Good News from God.

15 "The right time has come," he said, "and the Kingdom of God is near! Turn away from your sins and believe the Good News!"

“The right time has come, and the Kingdom of God is near!” This was the message which Jesus began preaching in Galilee. (Compare Col. 1:13; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Luke 17:20-21.) The teachers of the law would connect what Jesus was saying with the prophecy of Daniel. Daniel’s 70 weeks (490 years) would pinpoint the beginning of 27 A.D. (by the corrected calendar). And so they would understand what Jesus said in the light of Dan. 7:22 (“The time had arrived for God’s people to receive royal power”). It is easy to see why they would take this in a political sense, but that was not what God had in mind.

Note that Matthew quotes Jesus using the phrase “Kingdom of heaven.” And that this means the same as “Kingdom of God.” The Kingdom was *near*, but the “setting up” could not take place until Jesus was *glorified* in death and resurrection (see Luke 24:44-49; John 7:37-39). The public ministry then, was *preparation* for the climax of *God’s act in history* --which is the *crucified Christ*. The first statement of the resurrection was by a woman (16:9-11), but the first official declaration of God’s terms of salvation was at Pentecost (Acts, Ch. 2). Paul could later say: “He rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us safe into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Col. 1:13). The announcement of the coming of the Kingdom was certainly Good News to the entire world (compare Isa. Ch 52).

What Jesus had announced, contains two points of sharp change. First, he says, *near*. Jesus knew he had been sent to begin a new era of salvation. The crucifixion and Pentecost would be decisive stages in making this possible. The basis for this new salvation was to be Christ - on - the - cross, the *crucified Messiah*. (Compare Heb. 9:15; 1 Cor. 1:18-25.) This was to be “the very thing God prepared for those who love him: (the primary meaning in 1 Cor. 2:9b). God intended for us to “reach out through faith to seize the sacrifice of Christ to make ourselves part of it” (see Rom. 1:16-17; Col. 2:11-13). Because of what God has already done, there must be a final Judgment upon all who have rejected this offer of salvation during their life on earth. Jude shows us the Lord coming to execute vengeance upon “godless sinners” at the world’s end (Jude 14-15).

The second point is that Jesus called on the Jewish people to *turn back to God*. They had thought themselves to be free from sin, but they were no better off than the Gentiles (compare Rom. 3:9-20). In this *calling* to repent, Jesus was saying the same thing as John the Baptizer (and their work overlapped, see John 3:22-24). But John could only point to the One who was coming. Now the Messiah himself called them to believe the Good News and receive God’s promise!

Questions for discussion

(Mark 1:1-15)

1. If Mark’s Gospel had been lost, would this have cost us anything that could not be found in the other Gospels?

13. What was the purpose of John's baptism?
14. What does it mean to be a "Nazirite?" Was Jesus a Nazirite? Why not?
15. Did the people who heard John understand the promise of the Holy Spirit?
16. Do you see a relationship between the baptism of Jesus and the baptism of a believer into Christ? Discuss the similarities and differences.
17. Why was the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove?
18. What were the other two times during the life of Jesus when God spoke from heaven?
19. What was the role of the Holy Spirit in the temptation?
20. Why is the time of the temptation important?
21. Was Jesus tempted during the entire forty days?
22. Why mention wild animals and angels?
23. Why does Jesus say the right time has come?

24. What was the Good News Jesus preached?

25. Why does he mention *repentance* before *belief*?

26. What is the Kingdom Jesus spoke about?

27. How do Daniel 2:44; 7:22; Isa. 52:7 relate to the message Jesus preached?

28. How would you preach the gospel today using 1:14-15 as a text?