

The Beginning of the Gospel

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[0 : 0 0] I'd invite you to look with me at the chapter in the New Testament, part of which we have read, the Gospel by Mark chapter 1, and thinking together of the verses that we read together there, centering our thoughts first of all around verse number 1, where we read the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the beginning of the Gospel. Many of you will be quite familiar with 3D pictures, quite popular nowadays in the cinema, and when we have a 3D picture it gives us an idea of what things look like in depth. You can see not just the front flat picture of an image, but the whole mass of the object or person. Some have more mass than others.

The first three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, give us a 3D look as it were, at the person and the work of Jesus Christ, viewing his life from differing angles. We speak of Gospels in the plural, but actually that is something that came into vogue long after the time the New Testament was written. It is one Gospel looked at in three different ways, and then the fourth Gospel, John's Gospel in many ways explains the meaning behind some of the incidents and the words which are recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Matthew wrote from a Jewish background for possibly mainly Jewish Christians. He shows that all that Jesus did and said was in fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy. Matthew is full of references to the Old Testament and how Jesus in his life and work fulfilled these. Now in Mark's Gospel, we also see the Jewish roots of the Gospel, but Mark explains some of these Jewish aspects because he was writing probably to a non-Jewish congregation possibly in Rome. He shows us the reality of both the divine nature of Christ and also the human nature of Jesus, and he shows us above all how the way of the cross dominated the whole life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Mark tells us this as Jesus went about his work often under the cover of secrecy so that he would not be diverted from his one great end to win the salvation of sinners like you and me. So as we look at these words this evening, I want us to underline first of all the preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, which is spoken of here in verse 1 where

Mark speaks about the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ. Mark is the shortest of the Gospels using that word in the plural again, but he has a wonderful economy of words, and that means that every statement of his is filled with so much meaning. And here he's speaking about the beginning of the Gospel. Now as I mentioned, our use of the word Gospel in the plural Gospels is something that came into vogue after New Testament times, the original classical use of the word which literally means good news always signified an event of great significance, of joyous significance, a situation that was introducing something of great importance for the world. For example, the Roman Emperor who was ruling at the time of Jesus, the Emperor Augustus, it was spoken of at his birthday, an evangel or a Gospel had happened. It was a significant event, it was said that it was good tidings for the world, but with reference to Jesus Christ it wasn't merely in an earthly sense that his coming was significant. And when Mark speaks about the beginning of the Gospel, he takes us back to the very first page of the Bible as it were, where in the beginning God created the world.

To emphasise, as Mark is emphasising here, that this was something happening under the direction of God. This beginning of the Gospel was indeed a historical event, the coming of God's Son Jesus Christ into the world. It had its origins with God and it was going to have a significant impact on the world. And of course the Gospel is literally good news, it's good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, his full title with all that that implies. And all that is written in the books that we know, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and so on, is the Gospel. All that Jesus did is the Gospel, all that Jesus said and continues to do his work through the Spirit, all that is the Gospel, grounded in history and having an abiding significance for all of us. Yes, even for those who don't follow Christ. When Mark speaks about the beginning of the Gospel then, he goes back to the Old Testament and then he

brings them up to date with events contemporary with the Lord Jesus

[9 : 25] Christ and how these had prepared for his coming. For example, he quotes verses from Exodus, Exodus 23 and verse 20, when God promised that he would guide his people, he would send the angel of the Lord before them. And in Malachi in chapter 3, which we read in our morning reading when he says that he would himself prepare the way for someone to come, intimating the coming of Jesus. And then in that passage in Isaiah chapter 40, which we read together and Mark, following a custom of Jewish teachers in his own day, he used the third reference which he quotes here to sum up the other two they're all brought together in this one particular reference here. He's telling about the one who was coming to prepare the way of the Lord. So just like Matthew, Mark sees Jesus as the fulfillment of prophecy. There was a background to his coming, a God ordained background, a preparation for the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And then we're introduced to another great event in that preparation for the coming of Jesus. John the Baptist, he is the one who was to be sent beforehand, the herald coming to fulfill another prophecy of scripture. He appeared in the desert, we are told, in the wilderness, preparing the way for the King and announcing his coming. And in doing so, he called people to repent and to make ready for the great one who was to come after him. So John the Baptist had a very particular, very important ministry. In fact, Jesus tells us elsewhere that John was the greatest of all the prophets because John had the most wonderful news to tell. Look, he is coming, behold the Lamb of God, he said, who takes away the sin of the world.

And there's so much about John the Baptist that fulfills all that was said about the great coming of the one, the herald. And the work of a herald was not to draw attention to himself, but to draw attention to the one who was coming after him. So we find that there was preparation for the coming of Jesus. But before we pass on from that, from the Old Testament prophets, from John the Baptist, and we find that Jesus himself came as a herald as well to proclaim a message from God.

But like John, Jesus didn't come simply to proclaim that message for all the preachers in the Bible, all the heralds, all the proclaimers were looking for a response to their message.

And that is what we have to reckon with too, when we hear God's word. It's not simply a case of hearing it, but we are called to respond to it. So when we come to church, we mustn't come to let the words flow over us. We've got to internalize them and make our decision as to whether or not we're going to believe and follow. There was preparation for the coming, the beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. But then there was also, and that is pointed out so wonderfully in this passage, the recognition of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If you look at verses 7 and 8 here, we read that this was John's message, after me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. And then in verse number 9, we have the fulfillment of that. At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. The one coming after John arrived in the person of Jesus Christ. Now we know from the other Gospel writers how surprised John the Baptist was when Jesus came and presented himself for baptism in the river Jordan, just like other people came confessing their sins and they were baptized as a symbol of their repentance. John knew Jesus and he could point to Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And Mark tells us in very few words about the baptism of Jesus and then following that the heavenly affirmation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the One who came to be the Savior of the world. For we read that after his baptism as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him, like a dove, and a voice came from heaven. You are my Son whom I love. With you I am well pleased.

What a wonderful, wonderful experience. The heavens were rent open. That means that this was a revelation from God. That's the meaning behind where we read here that the heavens were torn open.

[17 : 44] It's as if a curtain was torn apart and what was behind the curtain was revealed. This is from heaven. We wouldn't have known it otherwise. Jesus Christ saw the descent of the Spirit upon him and heard the voice of God, the Father. That's what's meant by the heavens being torn open. It focuses on these two events, the descent of the Spirit and the voice from heaven. Now the Holy Spirit is mentioned again in Genesis chapter 1. We read of the Spirit brooding over the waters. And here in this new beginning, the Spirit is present again. To strengthen Christ, he was given the Spirit without measure, we read. And he was prepared for the great work on which he was now entering in a public way. And the coming of the Spirit was a great messianic sign. The kingdom of God had

come.

And then we read of the voice from heaven. That also had a great message. It had a message for Jesus affirming him in his work and preparing him for the future. But it also has a great significance for us. It certainly had this great meaning for Jesus affirming his relationship with the Father. He is God's Son. This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

It's an eternal and essential relationship. But secondly, it shows us the Father's complete confidence in Jesus for the great work he was entering. Jesus recognized as the Messiah, the Savior. But we might ask, why the baptism? He did not have sinned himself. Why was he going into the waters as if he was another sinner among many who needed salvation? He went there because he identified himself with sinners like you and like me. He is the Lamb of God who bears away the sin of the world. He identified himself with us. Which begs the question, have you identified yourself with Christ? There was preparation for the coming of Jesus and there was this recognition of the presence of the Son of God among us. But then immediately after that, there was the testing of his calling. In verses 12 and 13 we read, at once the Spirit sent him out into the desert and he was in the desert for 40 days being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals and angels came and attended him. That's a strange experience. Immediately after the glorious affirmation of his sonship and the coming of the Spirit upon him, that same Spirit sent Jesus, the word is sent, is used here, but it doesn't have the strong meaning of the original word.

He was thrust out into the desert. There was a compulsion there that drove Christ into the desert, into the deeper wilderness. From the other Gospel writers we know that Jesus was attacked and tempted by the devil who tried to steer him away from the course on which he had set himself, the road that would lead inexorably to the cross of Calvary and his death. We're not party to all the temptations that Jesus was subjected to, but we're told that Satan showed him all the kingdoms of this world and promised them and their glory if only Christ would bow down and acknowledge Satan's rule. But Jesus must also have been shown the alternative route and the terrible agony and the horror and the forsakenness of the road to Calvary, but that was the way that he chose to go and we bless God for that, for without him going to Calvary there would have been no salvation. Jesus rejected Satan's way. He did not fail the test and then we read after that and you can feel the wonderful exhilaration and Mark's words telling us what happened to

Jesus next. In verse number 14 we read, after John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news, that is the Gospel of God. The time has come, he said, the kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the Gospel. Verse 1 tells us about the beginning of the Gospel.

[24 : 29] We read something of what was involved in that, both in the fulfillment of prophecy, both in the baptism of Jesus, the affirmation from heaven, the terrible temptations in the wilderness, but then with that behind him Jesus came preaching the Gospel, the good news.

And why did he come? Well the good news is that he is the Savior. He came to seek and to save that which was lost and to give his life a ransom for many. It is good news, it's joyous news, something that changes the world. I wonder if it's changed your world, because remember what I said, when the preachers preached, when Jesus proclaimed, it wasn't simply a word that he left like maybe a teacher in a classroom, it was a response, a response from you and from me. He came to save us. He triumphed over Satan, he can help you to triumph over Satan and the temptations that come to your life and to mine. He brought Satan's downfall so that we have hope, so that later on in the New Testament we read you can resist the devil and he will flee from you.

The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, let me ask you again, has it begun in your life and changed you? I pray to God that it has. Amen. Let us pray. Dear Lord, we do thank you for the Gospel and for the Lord Jesus Christ who was the embodiment of it and we pray that as each of us is challenged by the Gospel to believe in Christ and to follow him, that we may indeed respond positively, remembering that Jesus is the one who said, him that comes to me, I will in no wise cast out. So bless each one of us, we pray in the ways that we need for Jesus' sake. Amen.