

“A New Creation”

Mark 1.1-8

¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way,

³the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” [ESV]

HOPE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Mr. Bruce R. Johnson

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I. Introduction

Welcome to no. 2 in our series of sermons on Mark. Summary of first is in your OoW.

Matthew tells us he’s writing a “book.”^{»Matt. 1.1}

Luke says he’s giving us an “account.”^{»Lk. 1.3}

Mark announces that his words are “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”^{1.1} There was a day (August 21, A.D. 65?) when those words had not yet been written down. And then there came a time and place in history when a man named “John Mark” actually sat down with papyrus and stylus in hand – possibly at a table – and it was dusty (in my idiosyncratic view). He wrote “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

Not “*In* the beginning . . .” but simply “the beginning.” Imagine him sitting at the dusty table. It’s warm. Maybe a very slight breeze. Christ has been “gone” for 30-35 years. (Is that how Mark and his contemporaries would have put it? “Gone”?) Put yourself in the scene as Mark. You’ve traveled extensively with prominent men of the early church. You’ve listened carefully to Peter’s recounting of Jesus’ teaching. What would you have meant by writing “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”?

We will work toward an answer with the use of three “why” statements: Why it can’t be; why it must be and why it is. I’ll use the why statements to move the conversation along, not as part of a rigidly logical exercise.

II. Why it *could not* have been “the beginning”

A word and a phrase catch our attention – “gospel” and “Son of God.”

Do we throw “gospel” around so casually that it no longer grips us? “Gospel” (O.E. *good story*). If it truly is a gospel, it almost certainly must be eternal – without a beginning or an ending in time. If it had a beginning, the “god” who developed it must have been in some way contingent – waiting, as it were, for man to behave in a way which would make clear how the good story should be “written.” If it had an ending, the story would have communicated to us, by its last “page,” everything we needed to know . . . but *this* story is about an infinite God whose glory will be unfolded and displayed to and for His people forever without their ever reaching the “last page.” And so it is a story without an ending.

This story claims to be a story of the Son of God. His divinity is another reason why the story could have no beginning in time because the divine is eternal.

It’s not just any “good story” but the good story of the Son of God. There is something about *whose story it is* which elevates it above any other story. In a sense the full

meaning of whose story it is can be revealed only in the telling of the story. Christ changes the methods of story-telling.

The "gospel" did not begin at that time (imaginary A.D. 65) and in that place (at the imaginary dusty table). Mark knows that. He tells us that it's the gospel *of* Jesus Christ, the Son of God.¹ But can you imagine that? *This* gospel – this good story – features the *Son of God*. [Now – as a bit of an aside – think about this: Every Lord's Day – once in seven days – 52 times each year – we get to come to this place to hear the good story of the *Son of God*. We get to hear the gospel every seven days {soon we will be able to hear it twice in seven days}, and on most of those days we get to celebrate the Lord's Supper, remembering the sacrifice of the Son of God in His death. Brothers and sisters, do you preach to yourselves regularly the grace of God in allowing us to hear this story and participate in this sacrament?]

The gospel didn't begin when Mark sat down to write. What he's writing couldn't really be the beginning in a purely chronological sense. God is eternal; so is His Son. Mark knew it. He had the OT, telling him that, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God." Ps. 90.2

As James Edwards explains, ". . . the Baptizer is not simply the herald of the Messiah but of God himself, appearing in Jesus of Nazareth. [Vv.] 2-3 thus introduce John as the divinely ordained precursor of Jesus, and Jesus as the manifestation of God. The [Isaiah] quotation has the further effect of linking the life and ministry of Jesus to the OT. Jesus is not an afterthought of God, as though an earlier plan of salvation had gone awry. Rather, Jesus stands in continuity with the work of God in Israel, the fulfiller of the law and the prophets. . . . The gospel is understandable only as the completion of something that God began in the history of Israel." James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, p. 28 The gospel did not begin with John the Baptist's announcement any more than it began with Mark's sitting down to write.

Mark might as well have said, "I'm going to tell you a marvelous story. I must begin the story somewhere. I could choose many different places to begin it. My choice is not arbitrary because this story – the *vital* part of which many alive today have seen lived out right before them – actually began a long time ago (as men record beginnings and measure time). What we have seen of late – just about 35 years ago – was actually foretold at least 300 times in the Scriptures we hold so dear."

That day – the day when John the Baptist first proclaimed his baptism of repentance – was not truly the beginning – not when we think of the gospel as necessarily and inherently eternal.

¹ NIV says "gospel *about*." That's not the sense of this phrase. "About" keeps Jesus at arm's length. It's the "gospel *of* Jesus Christ" in the same sense that you might serve a dinner *of* steak and potatoes . . . or plant a garden *of* roses . . . or purchase a blouse *of* silk. "Of" connotes the *reality* of the thing itself. The "gospel *of* Jesus Christ" is that gospel of which Christ is the essence – the very thing itself. I would not be misleading you if I said that one way of conveying this point is that Jesus Christ *is* the gospel.

III. Why it *must have* been the beginning

But at the same time, it is a gospel *for* temporal creatures – each of whom has a distinct beginning as a unique person – and so God condescended to give the gospel an *apparent* beginning. [Can we imagine what it would be like to be a Person who does not need to think His way through how to bring about a certain result – such as the redemption of a chosen people? Such a thought process – if, indeed, it is even a process – is too wonderful for me; I cannot attain it. ^{Ps. 139.6]} Let's look at reasons why the proclamation by JTB must have been the beginning.

First, God displays a pattern of carefully providing heralds of His "Big Things." In Exodus 23.20 the concept of an *avant garde* (in anticipation of the conquest of Canaan): "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared." "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me."^{Mal. 3.1} And finally, the source Mark cites for his introduction of John the Baptist as the herald: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'" ^{Is. 40.3}

The announcement came through a bizarre person – one who dressed and ate funny, albeit in the mode of earlier prophets.

The announcement was made in the wilderness – in a sense the traditional meeting place for God and His people. ^{Jer. 2.2} "The wilderness repeatedly represents in Israel's history a place of repentance, and hence a place of God's grace." ^{Edw. 29}

John was a big hit. "All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him." Why? Because he "proclaim[ed] a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"!!!

[John did not forgive sins. His baptism was "in preparation for" or "with a view toward" forgiveness of sins.]

Extraordinary that "all of the country" would turn out to hear such a message. Tea Parties draw big crowds to hear what's wrong with "the other guy[s]." Size of crowds and accusatory nature of John's message are hints that something really new is going on – suggestions that the promises of Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 39 and Joel 2 are about to be fulfilled.

Crowds of this size attracted for the purpose of repentance indicated that *something* was beginning which was, at the very least, *different* from the 400 years of divine silence which preceded the Baptist's arrival on the scene.

Time to consider . . .

IV. Why it *was* the beginning

What was happening was *so* different that it really was a new beginning. John's words hint at the difference. "Look – the One who is coming is so much greater that I (and I know many of you believe me to be a great prophet returned) even I am not worthy to bend down and untie his sandal strap." Loosing of sandals and washing of feet were duties of slaves – specifically of Gentile slaves – in first-century Judaism.^{Edw. 33}

"But there's more," said John. "What I'm doing, you see – baptizing you with water – that's only symbolic. Just as I am a forerunner and not the 'real deal,' so this baptism with water is merely provisional of a more powerful reality to come. The One Who is coming – He's mightier than I and He's going to baptize you *in* the Holy Spirit."

Extraordinary declaration. In the OT the giving of the Holy Spirit was the sole prerogative of God. John was telling the Jews of his day that this prerogative was being transferred to Jesus. "Mightier than I . . ." Mighty Christ.

To think about the difference, think about "transcendent." God is not just of a higher order, but of a different order: Eternally self-existent. We are not even in the picture when we think of God's transcendence.

Similarly: Christ is not just mightier in the sense of being able to bench press more weight. He is mightier in the sense of being able to do things I (JTB) can't do – such as unite you with Himself.

Dangerous territory for the non-Greek-reading preacher: "With the Holy Spirit" conveys to the reader/speaker of American English the idea of "instrumentality" . . . just as "I have baptized you with *water* . . ." seems to convey that water is John's instrument. Metzger's **Textual Commentary on the New Testament** and other authorities conclude it's really " . . . in Holy Spirit," communicating a *union* of some form.

[From Reymond, **A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith**, beginning on page 925] A summary – without accompanying biblical texts: Baptism basically proclaims that a relationship exists. The nature of the relationship is that of union with Christ – particularly in His crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection. Contrast: A husband and wife are "united" and "one flesh" but not with respect to all acts. Here, however, Christ's crucifixion, death, burial and resurrection – acts of His hundreds of years before we were born – these acts are ours because this union is *that* close, *that* intimate.

Baptism also signifies cleansing from sins. This cleansing is a result of the sinner's union with the persons of the Godhead in the work those persons do in saving sinners – calling them, regenerating them, granting them repentance unto life, giving them faith *etc.* Here, in our passage, we see in verse 8 that it is from Christ that the regenerating work of the Spirit descends upon the elect.

And so we discover that "*the* gospel" is not just a set of words. Jesus Himself refers to "the gospel" only four times in Mark (five if you count the doubtful ending of chapter 16). Rather, the gospel is a set of changed relationships. Sixteen weeks ago, in the introductory sermon in this series, I urged you to place yourself in His-story. Now you see (v. 8) that, if you belong to Him, He has placed you both in the story and in His body.

This work is so radically different from the work done by any other person at any time in human history, Edwards tells us, that Mark's introduction of Jesus, through John the Baptist, "is no less momentous than the creation of the world, for in Jesus a *new creation* is at hand."²³

From all of this we infer the doctrine: Christ changes everything.

Some of the changes: He has given us a faith more precious, more valuable than gold.¹ ^{Pet. 1.7} Christ Himself is now being formed ^{Gal. 4.19} in those He has baptized "in Holy Spirit." He has enabled us to count it all joy when we meet trials of various kinds because we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness.^{Jas. 1.3} He has freed us from bondage to sin ^{Gal. 5.1} – a bondage which was all we had to look forward to before He baptized us "in Holy Spirit." He has brought us near to the Father.^{Eph. 2.13} He has given us the confident expectation of glory.^{Col. 1.27} (The foregoing is not merely a list; it is a description of life in the *new creation*.)

V. Personal application

Bishop Ryle (very pastorally) in conclusion (with language modernized):

Let us ask ourselves, as we leave the passage, how much we know by practical experience of the truths which John preached. What do we think of Christ? Have we felt our need of Him and fled to Him for peace? Is He king over our hearts and all things to our souls? What do we think of the Holy Spirit? Has He wrought any work in our hearts? Has He renewed and changed them? Has He made us partakers of the divine nature? Life and death depend on our answers to these questions, for "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him."^{Rom. 8.9}

We might add to Bishop Ryle's list of questions: Have you become a new creation in Christ?^{2 Cor. 5.17} Have you been buried with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life?^{Rom. 6.4} If not, I urge you to consider carefully the claim of Jesus of Nazareth to be the Son of God – to *be* the gospel.

Let us pray.