

The Beginning of the Gospel (the Beginning of Christianity)

Mark 1:1–11

Turn to Isaiah 40 please. We will go through the Gospel of Mark in the coming months. We're going through a Gospel so we can talk more about Jesus. We're going through Mark because among the books of the Bible, Mark is my first love.

This is called "the beginning of the gospel." "Gospel" is old English for "good news." In Mark 1:14–15, we read that Jesus was preaching the gospel of God, the good news of God. He said, "repent and believe in the gospel." Jesus was just beginning his ministry. He has not died for anyone's sins, he hadn't even talked about it. What does Jesus preach that he calls "the gospel"?

Jews used the word "gospel" before they ever heard of Jesus. The book of Isaiah got this started. So we're going to read three verses from Isaiah, because we want to understand what Isaiah meant by "good news." That's because when Jesus began to preach the good news, Jesus meant what Isaiah meant. For Isaiah, what is the good news? That's the first thing we want to know.

1 Good News: Here is your God! - Isaiah 40:9–11

*You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"*

Six hundred years before Christ, the Jews were defeated by the Babylonians, as God's punishment for their persistent idolatry. The Babylonians took them to Babylon to live there. That's what the exile means. Long before they were exiled, God gave Isaiah a message of comfort for the exiles, for Jews living far from home in Babylon.

God promised to come back to them and take care of them and bring them home. They were sure they had been totally abandoned by God, but they hadn't. God would come back to take care of them again. For Isaiah, the good news boils down to one short sentence: "Here is your God!"

*Here is your God! See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm.
See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him.
He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.*

When the Old Testament prophets predicted God's severe judgment on Israel, they always ended their prophecy by promising a great restoration afterward. God himself would show up and free his people and care for them. That's where Isaiah's good news comes in.

But for Isaiah, get this, the good news was *not* God’s promise to come to Israel to restore and bless them. The promise was not the good news. The good news in Isaiah means that God has now shown up, and he is now doing what he promised. That’s what Isaiah meant by “gospel”: “Here is your God!”

You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, “Here is your God!” Here he is! Can you see him? The Sovereign Lord comes with power!

The good news is that God himself has arrived to restore everything. God’s kingdom has arrived. Repent and believe in this good news. For Isaiah, the gospel was the news that the time was fulfilled, God had arrived, God was now at work to do what he promised.

2 God Promised a Messenger to Prepare His Way – Mark 1:1–3

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.

Mark’s opening line introduces the beginning of his Gospel. For our purposes the beginning of the gospel is Mark 1:1–20. We’ll do verses 1–11 this week, and 12–20 next week. The important thing here is that the good news we found in Isaiah is actually the story of Jesus the Christ. In verse 1, Mark tells us that Jesus is the center of God’s great restoration. Telling the story of Jesus is telling the good news that Isaiah described.

Then Mark goes straight to a prophecy from Malachi and Isaiah: *As 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 wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’”*

Before God himself shows up to do his great restoration, with his mighty ruling arm and his gentle carrying arm, he will send a messenger to get the people ready to meet God. If someone really important was going to show up at your door, you would appreciate a little warning, so you could get ready to meet the important person. “Prepare the way for the LORD.” This also is in Isaiah 40, just a few lines before the good news lines.

3 John the Baptist is the Messenger God Promised – Mark 1:4–6

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

John is the messenger that comes just ahead of God. The messenger God promises through Isaiah will call people in the wilderness. So, John goes into the wilderness, and preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John did not preach repentance or forgiveness of sins.

He preached a particular kind of baptism. Being baptized by John meant you had made a wholehearted choice to live in God's ways, and to receive his forgiveness. That's what baptism still means. I will live in God's ways, and I want his forgiveness of sins. That baptism was a critical piece of receiving the good news. Still is.

Jews from all over came to John to hear his preaching and be baptized. Many, many people came. They confessed their sins, which means they knew they had to change, and they knew they needed God's forgiveness.

In v6, Mark tells us about John's clothing and food. Does John's food and clothing matter? Yes, it does. In Malachi 4, Malachi said that God's messenger would be like Elijah come again. 2 Kings 1 describes Elijah much as Mark describes John. When Mark writes verse 6 about John's clothing and food, he assumes his readers know Malachi and 2 Kings, and will put it together.

If we know Malachi and 2 Kings, we see more evidence that that John was the messenger that God promised, because he's like Elijah. Mark uses the Old Testament, without saying so, to tell us that John really was the messenger that would come right ahead of God.

4 John Predicts the Great One Coming Next – Mark 1:7–8

This was John's message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

I am not worthy to untie his sandal. I am not worthy to touch his feet. If we've been following the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi, the one to show up after John the messenger would be God himself! John stops short of saying that, but he does put himself far below the Coming One.

Jesus himself says later that among those born of women, no one is greater than John the Baptist. John says that Jesus is as much greater than he is as the Holy Spirit is greater than water. John soaks people in water, but the Coming One will soak them in the Holy Spirit! And he's coming next!

5 The Great One Arrives! – Mark 1:9–11

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven 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; in you I delight."

Jesus of Nazareth came to John. This is a big moment in Mark's introduction. Isaiah said that the good news was when God himself actually showed up to do what he promised.

The good news is, “Here is your God.” First, though, God would send a messenger to get people ready to meet him. So John the Baptist came and prepared people to meet God. John said a Great One was coming right after him.

And then Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee to the Jordan River. Is this the Sovereign LORD coming in power to rule with a mighty arm? Doesn’t quite seem like that, does it? But don’t miss how Mark has set this up. At the very moment when Almighty God should arrive, Jesus of Nazareth arrives at the Jordan River. It is not what we expected. On the other hand, Mark clearly believes that this is God coming in power to rule. So we’ll keep reading.

Jesus wants John to baptize him. No one has entirely figured this out. Jesus does not need to repent, and he does not need forgiveness of sins. So why be baptized? Why? Jesus was made just like us, in every way. Jesus was tempted just like us, in all the common ways. He was weak in his temptations. Hebrews tells us these things.

Jesus needed to submit to what God his Father wanted him to do. That’s the best explanation for his baptism. Jesus wanted John to baptize him so he could say to his Father, “I am your servant. I will obey you.” By being baptized, that’s what he said to God, as we do in our baptisms.

When Jesus was baptized, God burst out! He could not contain himself. First, Jesus saw the heavens torn open. I have trouble imagining what that looked like, but that’s what Jesus saw. Then through that ragged opening he saw the Holy Spirit came down on him like a dove.

And then the Voice. Jesus heard the Voice from heaven speak to him. “You are my Son, whom I love; I am delighted with you!” God means those words to Jesus just as he said them. It was the Father’s warmest possible affirmation of Jesus of Nazareth.

But that’s not the whole story. We’ve had Old Testament explanations throughout Mark’s opening, and that continues here. Jesus will have heard from Joseph and Mary what God told them at his birth, that he was the Christ, the chosen descendant of David. But for Jesus that was a long time ago, and it was said to his parents not to him.

Psalm 2 says. “*I will proclaim the LORD’s decree: He said to me, ‘You are my Son.’*” Jesus has just heard God’s Voice from heaven say, “You are my Son.” Psalm 2 predicts the Messiah. So Jesus knows that God is telling him that Psalm 2 is about him. God is telling him that he is the Christ of Psalm 2, the whole psalm.

“I am delighted in you.” In Isaiah 42 God says, “*Here is my Servant, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him.*” Jesus has just received the Spirit, and he hears these words, “I am delighted in you.” So Jesus knows that he is the Servant of Isaiah’s Servant songs (Isaiah 42, 49, 50, and 53). When God puts his Spirit on Jesus and says to Jesus, “I am delighted in you,” God told Jesus that he was the Servant of Isaiah’s Servant songs. We don’t know how long it took Jesus to figure all this out, but it won’t have been too long.

“You are my Son, whom I love.” There is only one place in the Old Testament that could be behind those words: Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac. “Abraham, take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and sacrifice him as an offering.”

When God said to Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love,” before long Jesus will have realized that God was saying, “You will be my Isaac Son, Jesus of Nazareth; I will sacrifice you as an offering.”

We have gone through these three texts since Christmas: Psalm 2, the messianic psalm; Isaiah 42 and the other servant songs; and Genesis 22, the binding of Isaac. When Jesus was baptized to say to God, “I will obey, I will do your will,” these are the Scriptures that God gave Jesus to guide him and help him. And remember that the Holy Spirit had just come on him, to help him understand these things and to help him live this life.

We don’t know how much of this Jesus already guessed or figured out. What we do know from how Mark tells it is that was a huge step between Jesus and his Father. Jesus needed to see the heaven torn open, and see the Spirit come down on him. Jesus needed to hear what God said to him. Whatever Jesus knew beforehand, this event became his foundation. It was his call. We can see that in Mark 11.

6 Epilogue: “Jesus, what is your authority? Mark 11:27–33

Mark 11 begins Jesus’s final week in Jerusalem. In the middle of Mark 11, he cleared the temple courtyard. He chased out those who were buying and selling, and he turned over the tables of the money changers.

The next day the Jewish leaders came to Jesus. They were offended at what he had done. Who does Jesus think he is? They ask him, “What is your authority to do that? Who gave you this authority?” Jesus said, “I’ll ask you a question. If you answer mine, I’ll answer yours. Here’s my question: did John’s baptism come from heaven or from people?” The leaders said, “we don’t know.” “Too bad,” said Jesus, “because then I won’t answer your question.”

But he has answered it. Where did Jesus get his authority? From John’s baptism. When he was baptized by John, the Spirit came on him. When he was baptized by John, God told him he was the Christ of Psalm 2 and the Servant of Isaiah 42. That means he has authority to clear the temple courtyard. He got his authority when he was baptized by John.

Conclusion

This is how the gospel began. This is how Christianity began. It’s good to remember the beginning. Isaiah said that the good news was that God had actually arrived to do the great work he promised. “Finally, waiting is over, here is your God!” That’s the good news. John came to get people ready to meet God, and John said the Great One was coming right after me.

And then Jesus of Nazareth came from Galilee to be baptized. That's not what we were expecting. The kingdom of God never has been what people expect it to be. It is so ordinary. Where is the Sovereign God with his mighty arm, ruling in power? Jesus of Nazareth comes from Galilee to be baptized in the Jordan? That's it?

This is how the good news actually began. This is how Christianity began. This really was the kingdom of God in action. And we are here, now, because we put all our hopes in the hands of this Jesus. His hands and his feet have scars now. And he still says what he said back then: "Come to me. Follow me." And we came, and we follow him, and we call him "Lord," and that's why we keep gathering in his name. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, it is good for us to remember your life. Not long ago it was Christmas, when we celebrated your birth. And we are moving toward Easter, when we remind ourselves about your death and resurrection. Today, we remembered your baptism. Lord Jesus, we give you glory, in the words of John's Revelation: to you who loves us and freed us from our sins by your blood, to you who made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve your God and Father—to you be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.