

## **The Beginning of the Gospel Part 2: Follow Me – Mark 1:12–20**

Turn to Mark 1 please. Mark opens his Gospel with the words, “*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.*” We’re taking the first twenty verses as the beginning of the Gospel. But these verses do more than open Mark’s Gospel. These verses show us the very beginning of the Christian message, the Christian faith. How did Christianity begin? What started it? Mark’s first twenty verses give us a short powerful story of how it began.

We’ll review two of the things we saw last week, for those who weren’t here and for those like me who can’t remember for a whole week. We started with Isaiah’s definition of the good news. For Isaiah, what was the good news of God?

In the Old Testament, God promised that after he scattered Israel and Judah, he himself would return to bring his people back to their land, and bless them. All the faithful Jews in the time of Jesus looked forward to that. For Isaiah, the good news was that God is now returning to keep his old promise.

That God would return to rule and bless was *not* the good news. The good news was that waiting is over, God is now fulfilling that promise, God has arrived. “He’s here! God has come! Can you see him?” That’s what Isaiah called the good news.

The second thing to remember is that when the messenger’s work was finished, and God was supposed to show up from heaven, Jesus showed up from Nazareth in Galilee. Isaiah said the Sovereign LORD would come with power and rule with a mighty arm. What actually happened? Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John. It does not seem like we’re talking about the same thing, does it? No it doesn’t. But Mark is clear: Jesus arriving from Galilee is the good news that Isaiah described.

Jesus was baptized to submit to God, to say to God, “I will serve you, not my will but yours be done.” And God the Father was waiting on the edge of his seat for this. As soon as Jesus had been baptized, God tore the heavens open, and Jesus saw it! God sent the Spirit down on Jesus like a dove, and Jesus saw it. And the Voice of God said to Jesus, “You are my Son, whom I love; I am delighted with you.”

And that’s how far we got last Sunday.

### **1 Jesus in the Wilderness – Mark 1:12–13**

*At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels took care of him.*

I call this series on Mark, “Mark’s Portrait of Jesus.” We have four Gospels, four stories of Jesus, and they are all a little different from each other. Each writer uses words to paint us a portrait of Jesus. Each portrait is different from the others. They clearly all describe the same person, but they each draw attention to different things.

There is always a temptation to fill in the gaps of one Gospel with information from the other Gospels. I’m trying not to do that. We will let Mark have his say about what Jesus is like.

Matthew and Luke have much longer stories of Jesus being tempted in the wilderness. Mark does not. Many of your Bibles will have a heading over verses 12–13 that says, “the temptation of Jesus.” I don’t think we’d do that if we had not read Matthew and Luke. I’ll read the verses again. I think “Jesus in the Wilderness” is a better heading.

*At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels took care of him.*

There’s more emphasis here on Jesus being in the wilderness than on him being tempted, so we’ll take it that way. *At once the Spirit sent him into the wilderness.* “At once.” What happened to Jesus at his baptism had to have been the most exhilarating spiritual experience that he’d ever had. God had met with him, given his Spirit, spoken to him, and called him.

Immediately the Spirit sent him into the wilderness. Spiritual high to spiritual wilderness right away. It must have been a jolt.

There are five short phrases in these two verses. You think about your time in the wilderness. 1 The Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness. 2 He was in the wilderness forty days. 3 He was tempted by Satan. 4 He was with wild animals. 5 Angels took care of him.

Let’s go over this with a bit more care. When we find ourselves in our wilderness, we might wonder what we did wrong to get there. How can we make sure this does not happen again. No people, that won’t work. The Holy Spirit sent Jesus into the wilderness. The Spirit was as much a part of Jesus in the wilderness as Jesus at his wonderful baptism experience.

He was in the wilderness forty days. That’s quite a while. Much longer than it took to be baptized and hear from God. On the other hand, it does end. Wilderness seems long while we’re in it, but it does end.

He was tempted by Satan. Absolutely. We’re always vulnerable to temptation and sin, and certainly when we’re in the wilderness. Expect it.

He was with wild animals. In the Old Testament, most of the time wild animals are dangerous to people, and that will be the sense here. There are dangers around besides Satan’s temptations. The wilderness is not a comfortable place. We all know about being in the wilderness.

Lastly, angels took care of him. Angels watched over him. Listen to what Psalm 91:11–13 says about angels and dangerous wild animals:

*God will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways;  
they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.  
You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent.*

Hebrews 1:14 says: *All angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those whom God will deliver.* God commands his angels to guard us in all our ways. They are all sent to serve us whom God will deliver. They are taking care of us when we are in our wilderness.

Wilderness experiences are not comfortable. Remember that the Spirit leads us into wilderness times. Remember that God commands his angels to guard us in all our ways, particularly in the wilderness.

## **2 Jesus Preaches the Good News – Mark 1:14–15**

We might think that once Jesus has been baptized, he received the Spirit and been called by God, then he is ready to begin his service. We'd be wrong. All that must happen, and then Jesus must also endure his time in the wilderness. Then he's ready. He has to be called and tested. He has to be thrilled, and then he has to endure. Then he may begin.

*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has arrived. Repent and believe the good news!"*

In Isaiah 40, the good news is that God has now arrived to keep his old promises. When Mark says that Jesus proclaimed the good news, that's what Jesus meant. The next two phrases say just that: *The time has come. The kingdom of God has arrived.*

*Repent and believe the good news.* Repent means give yourself wholeheartedly to living in God's ways. And believe that the great and powerful work of God is now beginning.

By the time Mark gets to the end of verse 15, he's built up a high sense of expectation. He began with Old Testament prophecies about the messenger that would come ahead of God. Then John came, and John was the promised messenger. And John said a Great One was coming after him.

And then Jesus came and was anointed by God. And then Jesus said, "the time has come, the kingdom of God has arrived." So we're expecting something incredible from God any minute now! What might that be?

### 3 Jesus Calls the First Disciples – Mark 1:16–20

*As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of people.” At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.*

This is the most basic picture of being a believer that the New Testament gives us. Jesus walks up an ordinary road with a small group of people. When he gets to where you live, or where you work, or where you go to school, he tells his followers to wait for a minute. Then he comes to you. He knocks on the door and you come to the door. Or he finds you in your yard or work place and he comes to you.

And he says to you, “Follow me. Come with me.” You put down what you’re doing, and you walk down the driveway with him, and you join that group of followers. You did not choose them, and they did not choose you. But they chose to follow Jesus, and how you have chosen to follow Jesus, so you are all together.

Jesus did not ask what you believe, he did not ask you to pray, or sign a paper. He said, “follow me,” and you dropped everything to follow him. These other things matter, but they all flow out of this simple action.

Peter and Andrew and James and John don’t say a word. This story is so simple it is stunning. It is almost unbelievable. It is so drastic. They immediately drop what they are doing, and leave everything, and they start walking with Jesus. That’s it.

Same thing in Mark 2. *As Jesus walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector’s booth. “Follow me,” Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him (2:14).* The old life is over. The new life is Jesus.

Isaiah says the good news is, “*See? Can you see it? The Sovereign LORD comes with power, he rules with a mighty arm.*” Picture this. You are standing far away from the Sea of Galilee, and you can see from a distance that this really is God coming with power to rule with his mighty arm. From a distance, you know that’s what’s happening. But you come closer to see more clearly, and perhaps you use binoculars to get all the details, and what do you actually see?

You see Jesus of Nazareth, walking beside the sea, calling two sets of brothers to follow him. You ask, “Can this be the Almighty coming with power?” “Yes,” says Mark. “Yes, it is, that is the Almighty coming with power to do his great work. That’s what it looks like when you get close.”

And once we have grasped that, we have seen what Mark calls the beginning of the Gospel.

Women followers? Yes, though we do not hear much about them until Jesus died. Mark 15: 40–41. *When Jesus died, some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.*

Many Galilean women were his followers, and they came with him to Jerusalem. His followers had lots of men and women both. And in Mark and the other Gospels, the followers with money were women. Women followers bought the groceries and paid the bills.

One more thing: “*Come, follow me,*” Jesus said, “*and I will make you fishers of people.*” That line gets translated different ways, but in Greek it says, “*You follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.*”

This line bothered me, because it sounds like if we follow Jesus, he will make us into evangelists, and that was not working for me. I was not an evangelist. The gift of evangelism is the only spiritual gift I’ve ever prayed for, not because I particularly wanted it, but I thought it would be a good idea if a pastor was also an evangelist. But God did not give that gift.

Eventually I realized that these two sets of brothers were among those Jesus sent out to preach. He did make them into fishers of people, and that is what he meant. So I started taking the line another way: “You follow me, and I will make you what I want you to be.” For me, that’s great. I have something to do, and Jesus has something to do. My job is to follow him. His job is to make me what he wants me to be.

I remind him about this from time to time. “Jesus, I’m doing my best to follow you. Remember that you said you’d make me what I should be.” My consolation in this is that all Four Gospels tell us quite a few stories of the disciples getting it wrong.

And Mark has more disciple failure stories than any of the other Gospels. He is the bluntest of the Four when it comes to the disciples. Although they left everything to follow Jesus, they still needed a lot of work. Jesus still says to each of us “you follow me, and I will make you what you should be.”

When the Lord returns, then we will see more clearly that the Sovereign LORD comes with power to rule with a mighty arm. But that second coming only works because Jesus came the first time and walked in ordinary places and said to ordinary people, “Follow me, come with me.”

Let’s make this our story. We chose to follow, and that’s why we worship together. We left everything because Jesus stood face to face with us and said, “follow me.” This is how you and I became believers. This has happened to you and to me. And remember that he says, “you follow me, that’s your job. I will make you what I want you to be, that’s my job.” And remember that the original disciples took a lot of work. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, we want to follow you. You have said to each of us, “follow me,” and we did. We’re so glad you called us. Where would we be if you had not? Thank you for your patience with your first followers. It gives us hope. Lord, make us what you want us to be. And help us when we’re in the wilderness. We relieved that you know what that is like. You’re our Champion! Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct your hearts into God’s love and into Christ’s perseverance. May the Lord of peace give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.