

## Study in Mark 1:1-15

This study in the first chapter of the Gospel of Mark is provided as a camp follow-up resource. My idea was to provide a study guide that would assist someone to study this Gospel either one on one with a younger person or in a small group setting. My thinking behind this is to help younger people become more acquainted with Scripture, here Mark's Gospel and through their study, to grow in their knowledge and trust of the triune God. I also hope, in having them work through a whole book of Scripture, that they can grow in their ability to study God's word on their own.

I know that leading a Bible study can be daunting. I tried to write this guide with enough to help with a careful reading of the text, but not so much as to be overwhelming. There are questions along the way to try and generate discussion and I certainly hope that, if used, people will feel free to go at their own pace. The primary goal is to have fellowship together in the written word of God and, through the Holy Spirit, with the living word, Jesus Christ – the One the Scriptures bear witness to.

### *Introduction to Bible Study*

Why do Christians study the Bible? In general, when I have asked this question over the years, I find that most Christians go to the Bible to learn how to live as followers of Jesus: how to pray, how to use our money or treat other people, what is good leadership, etc.

The Bible, however, was not written to primarily answer these questions. It is written to tell us about who God is: Who is this God who has spoken to Abraham and Moses and created a people for Himself? Who is this God who meets us Himself in Jesus Christ?

Amazingly, the Bible reveals to us a God who wants to be known by His creation. And He doesn't just want us to know about Him but to be drawn into an intimate relationship with Him of knowing and being known. The God of the Bible wants us to know His heart, His mind, His character, and His purposes. The writers of the Old and New Testaments are witnesses to this God—in their writings, they point beyond their words to reveal the living God so that their readers might come to know Him better.

And when we study, we can have confidence that God by His Spirit is present and at work. The triune God Himself meets us by and in His Spirit as we study.

In Bible study, we place ourselves before the text to listen. We seek to hear from the speaking God in His written word. We want to let the author of the book we are studying point us to, lead us to, Jesus Himself. We want, therefore, to seek to hear and understand what he is telling us about God.

The purpose of Bible study is to feed our faith in God and this happens as we come to see and hear who He is. It is only out of this framework of knowing who God is that we can begin to answer the many other questions of what, how, and why.

My hope for this Bible study guide is to enable you to gaze more fully at the good and life-giving character and purposes of the triune God as he is revealed to us through these words of Mark.

### *Introduction to the Gospel of Mark*

After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, He sent the Holy Spirit upon His followers and they began to go out and tell others about Jesus. They spoke as eyewitnesses to Jesus – passing on what they had seen and heard from Him. It was important from the beginning of the church that the message that was preached was based in historical fact, in eyewitness (if this is a topic that interests you, a great book to read is *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham).

The gospels that we have in the New Testament were written when these eyewitnesses were beginning to die off. But many were still alive and could testify to the accuracy of these written accounts. Some of the gospels, like John and Matthew, were written by those who were themselves eyewitnesses. The other two, Mark and Luke, were written and compiled from the testimonies of those who were eyewitnesses. There is good early evidence available that Mark's main source for the stories in his gospel was Peter.

Scholars overwhelmingly believe that Mark was the first gospel written, probably between A.D. 65-67. It is the shortest gospel and Mark often gives more details for the stories he does include. From the evidence of the gospel

itself, it looks like Mark was primarily writing to Gentile Christians who were suffering for their faith in Jesus.

He is writing to remind them of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished for them and what He is still up to by His Spirit. He is writing to encourage and grow their faith in this Jesus in the midst of whatever they are facing in their lives. In order to more fully live by trust in Jesus' presence and work, we need to grow in our knowledge of Him. So we read these words from the same place as those first readers – seeking to feed our faith in Jesus Christ.

We can assume that Mark wrote his gospel to bear witness to this Jesus and to help us trust Him. He was deliberate in what he wrote – what he includes and what he omits, how he begins, the words he uses. So when we study, we want to come ready to listen to what he does say and to trust the Holy Spirit to enable us to come to see and know the triune God better through his words. The translation that is used in these studies is the English Standard Version.

### **Mark 1:1-15**

The first 15 verses of Mark chapter one form a whole unit in Mark and so I have written about them together. However, there is a lot here and you might prefer to break down this into 3 study times. I tried to write this lesson with that possibility in mind and so have divided the material into 3 parts.

Before you begin each study, take a moment to pray – to thank the whole God for being present and speaking in this time and to ask for ears to hear and hearts to receive from this passage.

Read over the text of Mark 1:1-15 a couple of times and then answer the questions that follow.

1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. 2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, 3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 And 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. 6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And 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. 8 I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 10 And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

12 The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. 13 And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

1. What repeated words or ideas do you find in this passage? (for example, proclaiming and preaching)
2. Mark speaks here about both John the Baptist and Jesus. What are the similarities and differences in his descriptions of these two and their ministries? Make a list of what he says about each of them. What do you notice?
3. What questions do you have about this passage?

### ***Digging Deeper: Where to begin? (1:1-3)***

1. Looking at the first three verses, what strikes you about where Mark begins his gospel in the very first opening line? What is he telling us? Do you notice anything unusual about that first line?

#### *Good News!*

How does one go about writing a gospel about Jesus? Where should one begin? Matthew and Luke both started with genealogies and narratives about Jesus' birth. John begins further back, speaking of the Son of God's existence from before the beginning of time.

Mark begins with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Without a verb, this statement appears to be a title. Mark begins by announcing that he is writing about good news, good news about this particular person Jesus, who is the Christ and the Son of God.

The word “gospel” means good news and was usually used at that time to speak of an announcement of a victory by a king and his army. Mark chooses this word to speak of his message. All that he is going to tell us about Jesus is good news about a king and a victory. Whatever the situation of those who read this, Mark wants the first thing for us to know and remember to be this – that Jesus is great good news!

Mark also wants to remind his readers right away of the central points of who this Jesus is. First of all, he is the Christ or the Messiah. He is the One promised to Israel to bring about salvation and God’s good reign over His people. He would bring His people back to God. Secondly, Mark tells us that this Jesus is not just another human who has been given a special commission by God. He is the Son of God Himself, come here to us as fully man and fully God.

Why do you think he includes all these titles with the name “Jesus”?

Mark makes sure that his readers know that this good news is all about a particular person – this particular person, Jesus. He is not sharing good news about new ideas or a new religion. In fact, you could say that the gospel isn’t just a message about Jesus, it is Jesus Himself! So as we respond to this gospel, we see that most fundamentally, we are responding to this One, this person.

*Where did it all begin?*

One more interesting feature of Mark’s first line is that he uses the word “beginning”. He doesn’t say “The gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”, but “The beginning of the gospel ...” So, maybe this isn’t so much a title of the whole work, but a heading for what comes right after. Mark wants to point us to where this good news of Jesus really began.

And what is the beginning? Well, Mark quotes from the Old Testament. While he ascribes his quote to Isaiah, the quotation that Mark gives at the beginning is actually drawing from three different places in the Old Testament (Mark is not being inaccurate here by not citing all three of these places. Naming only Isaiah as his main source was an acceptable practice at the time).

Let's take a look at the Old Testament sources and then consider what Mark's point is in starting here. Mark begins his quote with, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way." There are two places that this passage alludes to, both speaking of God preparing a way.

The first passage is Exodus 23:20. Here God promises Moses that He will send an angelic messenger ahead of the 12 tribes to prepare their way into the Promised Land: "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared."

The second passage actually comes from the very last book of the Old Testament, words written by the last prophet of the Lord, Malachi. After his ministry, there were no prophets of the Lord for 400 years. Malachi 3:1 speaks again of the Lord promising to send a messenger to prepare a way – but this time to prepare the way before God Himself: "Behold I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold he is coming, says the Lord of hosts."

Before we go on to consider what these verses add to the quotation Mark gives, let's consider the reference to Isaiah. This quote, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" comes from Isaiah 40:3. This verse is part of a larger section, 40:1-5. These words are addressed to the Israelites who have been forced from their homeland into exile in Babylon. The message here is that the exiles would be returning from Babylon and Jerusalem would be restored.

So, what does all this add up to? Why does Mark put together this quotation this way? What is he telling us about who God is – His character and purposes? And how is it connected to his calling this "the beginning of the gospel"?

This passage reflects the idea found in the Old Testament that God prepares the way for His good purposes to be accomplished. He didn't just give Moses the task of getting the Israelites to the promised land and wish him luck. No, God is committed to His plans for His people and *He prepares* their way. In Malachi, as God speaks of His coming again to restore His people, He speaks of sending someone before Him to prepare His way. God is not last-minute or haphazard.

In Mark's allusion to Malachi here, he quotes, "*I* will send *my* messenger" ... to "prepare *your* way." God is the speaker – who is He talking to? What we

have here is the Father talking to the Son. Mark wants to help His readers see and remember that God Himself has sent His Son Jesus to us and prepared the way for Him. This was always the plan between the Father and the Son.

So Mark wants us to see here that the beginning of the good news about Jesus goes back well before His birth in Bethlehem. His coming was something God was preparing the way for long ago. The Son's incarnation was not something random or a last minute change of plans.

### ***Digging Deeper: John the Baptist (1:4-8)***

1. Notice how Mark introduces John, "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness ..." Why do you think he does this? What does he want his readers to understand about John?
2. Mark gives a fairly brief section to John here. What are all the details that he does give?

*Who is this John?*

As we noted, Mark is rather cryptic in his introduction of John the Baptist and brief in his description. To understand what Mark wants us to see here, we want to pay close attention to his words.

First, let's consider what Mark wants to tell us about *who* John is. There are two points we can make.

Mark does not tell us anything about John's background. Instead, right after Mark quotes the Old Testament, he writes, "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." By repeating "wilderness" from the previous quote, it seems clear that Mark wants us to identify John as the one that God has sent to prepare the way for His Son. This is the main point Mark wants us to get about who John is – that he is the one prophesied about, the one who would be coming before the Lord. The Israelites had been waiting a long time for God to bring about His work of salvation and restoration. And here, Mark makes clear that these prophecies were fulfilled in John.

But there is one other point Mark makes about the identity of John. Did you wonder about Mark's description of John? Why does he include these particular

details? He wants his readers, who would have been familiar with the Old Testament, to associate John with the prophet, Elijah. In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as wearing “a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist.” So John, in his clothing, was identifying himself with Elijah and Mark wanted to make sure his readers knew that.

Why? What does this add to our understanding of what is going on here? Why does the one who has been sent by God to prepare the way need to be connected to Elijah? The answer is found in the next to last verse of Malachi. Remember, Malachi was the last prophet of the Lord. In his book he speaks of God preparing His own way – I quoted that earlier. In 4:5, Malachi writes, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.”

The last words the Israelites had received from God was that there would be a time where He would work in a decisive way in their history, in all history. There were many other prophecies in the Old Testament about a work God was going to do in their future. And here God tells them that a sign of this coming time would be Elijah being sent.

In John the Baptist, Mark is telling us, the one coming in Elijah’s name has appeared and so, the prophecy of Elijah’s return is fulfilled and the great day of the Lord has begun. After so many years of silence, God is speaking to His people again.

*How does John prepare the way?*

Mark tells us that John prepares the way by proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” and the One who is coming that is “much greater” than he. How might these two proclamations be connected?

Remember, John is preparing the way of the Lord. He is getting everyone ready for One who is certainly, then, greater than himself! And this is part of his ministry – he announces the coming of One who is so much greater than himself that he isn’t even worthy to stoop down and untie his sandal. This comparison John makes had even more power for his original audience because, in that culture, one’s feet were considered a dirty and shameful part of one’s body.

Besides knowing that a greater One than John was coming, what else did God have John do to prepare the way? He delivered a message and indicated the



way to properly acknowledge his message. John came to preach “a baptism of repentance” and baptize those who came.

To understand the significance of this proclamation of John’s, we need to understand what repentance is. The word in Greek, *metanoia*, means a change of mind and in the Bible, this change of mind always comes about as a response to God. In the Old Testament, God speaks of Himself and His purposes for His people and they are called to respond by turning towards God in faith and turning away from whatever makes trusting Him difficult. Or the call to repentance would involve turning back to God after they had drifted away from Him.

Look at John’s message. He calls for a baptism of repentance for the *forgiveness of sins*. In other words, He is calling people to come who are hoping for forgiveness for their sins – this is something they want. So they are willing to come, turn from their sins in baptism, in order to receive this forgiveness.

And this forgiveness of sins that they come for is somehow connected to the other part of John’s ministry which is telling them about the One who is coming. How could a baptism of repentance bring about forgiveness of sins? The Jews offered sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple for sins. What John was calling them to do was new, strange, unexpected. How can one receive forgiveness for sins by being baptized in a river? At this time, baptism was not a practice that the Jews themselves partook in. They did have various rituals of purification that involved water, but there doesn’t seem to have been any direct practice of the Jews that John is drawing from here. The only similar ritual was baptism for Gentile converts to Judaism. A Jew did not need to be baptized and, as I said, forgiveness of sins was provided for by sacrifices at the temple.

Mark gives us a sense that, in this ministry of John’s, a ministry prepared by God hundreds of years before, something amazing has begun. What would compel any Jew to respond to John’s call to come and be baptized? Why would they be willing to participate in an act that was so similar to what only Gentiles had to do?

Well, how is John’s message in the wilderness received? Apparently, very well, by those in the surrounding regions – “all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem”. I think Mark wants his readers to see that God’s preparing for His Son went beyond sending John. By His Spirit, He had prepared people to hear, come and repent.

So, John calls people, in anticipation of the One coming, to participate in a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin. But in his further description of

the One coming, it would appear that they were hoping for even more. John says that this One would baptize with the Holy Spirit, while he John, could only baptize with water.

The One that John points to has a unique relationship with the Spirit of God that enables Him to baptize others with this Spirit. What could this mean? Was there any hope in the Jewish people for some work of God's Spirit in their lives?

Yes! The coming work of God that was prophesied by many of Israel's prophets included a promise that God would one day pour out His Spirit on His people in such a way that would be about not only forgiveness of sins, but inner transformation. They would be redeemed, made new and able to obey God, live fully as His people in a way they couldn't without the Spirit. This hope, that John seems to be alluding to by proclaiming that the One coming would baptize them with the Holy Spirit, must have contributed to the people's willingness to come out to John and submit to his baptism.

Look up the following Old Testament passages on the Spirit. What do they tell you about God's plans for His people?

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Ezekiel 36:24-28

Isaiah 32:15

Isaiah 44:3

Joel 2:28

What does all this add up to? What is Mark doing in these relatively few verses, this description of the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ?

Mark is indicating here that Jesus really is the fulfillment of the prophecies the people of Israel were still waiting on God for. This Jesus that many of Mark's readers had come to trust, that hopefully you have come to trust, is not some lone religious leader, out to start a new religion or movement. He is God Himself, the Son of God, come in human flesh and God had been preparing for His coming for a long time before the moments Mark describes.

With John the Baptist's appearance in the wilderness, the 400 years of God's silence has ended. And he doesn't just preach of some uncertain time in the future when God will act, but of One who is coming soon.

## ***Digging Deeper: Enter Jesus (1:9-15)***

Mark now moves to talk about the One whom John was preparing for – Jesus Himself.

1. Earlier I had you make a list comparing what Mark tells us about John and Jesus. Now that we have taken some time to look more closely at John, what stands out about Jesus? What does Mark tell us?

### *Jesus' Begins His ministry with Baptism (1:9-11)*

Right after Mark reports John's words about Jesus – about His greatness and His coming to baptize with the Holy Spirit, Jesus appears on the scene. And the *first* thing Jesus comes to do is to be baptized by John along with the multitudes from Judea and Jerusalem!

Mark doesn't go into any details about the interaction with John and Jesus when Jesus comes to John to be baptized. He just reports the bare fact that Jesus "was baptized by John in the Jordan". He brings Jesus into the narrative as one more person who is coming to John to participate in the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

What a wild place to begin for the One who is so much greater than John! Jesus doesn't begin by baptizing John or by preaching, but by receiving baptism from John.

Mark doesn't explain why Jesus begins His ministry here in this act of being baptized. The significance of this baptism became clearer to His followers only later, as they reflected over His whole life, death, resurrection and ascension and as the Holy Spirit illuminated their minds and understanding. Only then did they come to see that Jesus taking on our our fallen human condition, our sin, in our place and on our behalf begins here at the river Jordan. Jesus is not confessing His own sin, but the sins of those He came to save, in our place and on our behalf.

Remember, Mark primarily wrote His gospel to bear witness to this Jesus, to remind the church of who Jesus is and what He is up to, to feed the faith of His followers. In starting here (and all four gospels include speaking of Jesus' baptism as the beginning of His ministry) Mark reminds us that Jesus has come as one of us, to bring us back to God, to bear in Himself our sin and alienation from God in order to redeem and save. Jesus begins His ministry by being baptized in our place

and this act points forward to the cross where He takes our sin all the way through death, judges and destroys it and comes through death to resurrection.

Here, Mark does point to the uniqueness of Jesus' baptism in comparison to every other baptism that John performed. What does he focus on?

He focuses on what happens immediately after Jesus came up out of the water. The heavens are opened, the Spirit descends on Him like a dove and He hears the voice of His heavenly Father. Only Jesus' coming up from baptism is answered by this coming down, this rending of heaven.

By now, many people had been baptized by John. Notice we know none of them in particular, none of them by name. Now comes Jesus, from Nazareth, to be baptized and there is an immediate response from the Holy Spirit and God the Father.

Why does Mark include this section? What might he want us to know? That Jesus is utterly and completely unique, that He begins His ministry as one of us, but also as the One who has the anointing of the Spirit and the approval of His heavenly Father. The whole Triune God is involved in what is going on in this moment, in this public ministry of Jesus that is about to begin.

In this moment, what does the Father tell His Son? That He is indeed His only beloved Son. That He, the Father, is well-pleased. And the promised Holy Spirit descends and settles in a dove-like fashion on Jesus. He has a unique relationship to the Father and to the promised Holy Spirit. Jesus and His Father are of one mind towards this redemptive work that is such good news for us!

### *Temptation in the Wilderness (1:12-13)*

Again, Mark is very brief here in his description – this time of Jesus' time in the wilderness. Notice what details he does give. What does Mark want us to remember or know about the character and work of Jesus from this description?

Jesus, the Messiah and the very Son of God, begins his public ministry submitting to John's baptism. And from there? He spends 40 days in the wilderness, where He undergoes testing by Satan. This is a well-known part of the story of Jesus, and Mark is very sparse in his description compared to the accounts in Matthew and Luke.

Mark states that Jesus is driven into the wilderness by the leading of the Spirit. He is tempted by Satan, with the wild beasts and ministered to by angels. Rather than telling us any specifics about the temptations, Mark focuses on the fact that Jesus' first act after being baptized for us is to endure being tempted to not trust His Father, by the one whose name means "accuser". This tells us a great deal about God and how He works to save and heal His people.

It is the Spirit of God that leads Jesus into the wilderness. As He is baptized in our place for us, the Spirit descends on Him, and He will carry out His public ministry in the presence and power of this same Spirit. Mark wants to remind us that, as the One who will uniquely baptize "you with the Holy Spirit", He lives by the Holy Spirit as the incarnate Son, the Messiah.

Matthew includes the fact of the angels ministering to Jesus during His time in the wilderness, but Mark is alone in telling of the wild beasts that were with Him during this time. It is not immediately apparent why Mark includes this detail. As Mark was most likely written in Rome to Christians who were facing persecution, some scholars have wondered if Mark includes this detail to comfort those who were at that time facing the possibility of confronting wild animals in the arena for their faith in Christ.

### *The Time is At Hand (1:14-15)*

With these two verses, Jesus begins His preaching ministry. It seems that all Mark has said up to this point is to lead to these words. Mark alludes to the arrest of John by Herod Antipas in a very cryptic way, "Now after John was arrested..." John has fulfilled his calling; he has prepared the way for Jesus. Now Mark turns our full attention to Jesus Himself. And after Jesus has submitted to baptism and endured tempting in the wilderness, He goes to Galilee where He preaches "the gospel of God".

What is this gospel, this good news of victory that Jesus proclaims? Here it is in a nutshell: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." There are two parts to Jesus' preaching, aren't there? First is His announcement and then follows His call to respond to this announcement.

Jesus proclaims that the time is fulfilled. Think for a moment about the astounding nature of this statement. For hundreds of years, the Israelites looked into the future, waiting for God to act as He promised. They had waited so long, it

must have become expected that God's work would always lie in the future. John's preaching, of the One to come, was also a message that pointed to the future.

And now Jesus, with these simple words, brings that waiting to an end. "The time is fulfilled". The preparation has been completed and the long awaited One is has now arrived; He is here. In the coming of Jesus Himself, the time is fulfilled.

Secondly, Jesus proclaims that God's kingdom, His good rule and reign, is "at hand". What does that mean? The prophecies had spoken of a time when God's rule of heaven would one day break in here, on this fallen, broken world – when what was distant would come near. And this is exactly what Jesus is announcing. "We have now arrived, the time has come and God's good rule has broken into time and space, here and now, and is within reach." What has brought about this momentous moment? Jesus Himself!

With this announcement, Jesus calls out to all who hear Him to respond accordingly. How does one respond to such news? By turning to live according to this new reality, believing or trusting this good news, and turning away from whatever doesn't fit with the real presence and activity of the King Himself. To hear this good news truly, is to change one's mind and course in order to receive and live according to the news of this great and long-awaited happening.

But what does the drawing near in Jesus of God's reign and rule look like on earth? And how is His kingdom connected with His baptizing with the Holy Spirit? Mark expects us to see that all the stories he goes on to relate of this Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, answers that question. The stories of the unfolding of His ministry, His character and purposes tells us what the inbreaking of God's kingdom in Jesus and the working of the Spirit is like. We will see in the studies that follow more of who God is and what His kingdom looks like since it is now "at hand."

### ***In Reflection***

1. As you look back over this beginning section of Mark's gospel, what strikes you the most about how God begins the work and ministry of His Son, Jesus?
2. In what ways does this passage help you trust Jesus in your own life more?