

Who is Jesus? That is the question of Mark's gospel. It is also the most significant question that humanity has ever asked. Currently, more than two billion people identify as Christians, followers of Jesus Christ. Usually, two people can't agree on where to go for lunch. How is it possible that one third of the earth's population have all come to the conclusion that this man is worth following? Who is this man?

People are always asking this throughout Mark's book. A whole synagogue wants to know in Mark 1:27. The religious leaders demand an answer in 2:7. The awestruck disciples ask this in 4:41. People from his hometown struggle to explain this in 6:2. And the priests in 11:28 also raise the issue. Some people say he is Elijah reborn, or one of the prophets (6:15), and a terrified King Herod thinks that he must be John the Baptizer come back from the dead. (6:16).¹

Mark knows the answer, and he writes his book in order to demonstrate from the events of Jesus' life exactly who He is. He's making a case for Jesus' identity, and as the narrative unfolds, many of these people find their eyes opened so that they can see the truth.

But right from the beginning, Mark tells *you*, the readers and hearers of his gospel, the answer: this is a book about Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. Mark believes, and wants you to believe, that the life and death and life he presents in this book makes it clear that Jesus is Israel's Christ, their Messiah, their anointed ruler and deliverer, and that Jesus is the Son of God, the one through whom God will manifest Himself to the world. Mark wants you to read every word with that in the back of your mind, so that you don't get distracted and blown about by every opinion and theory about Jesus. Mark doesn't want you to come to your own conclusion. He wants you to believe the truth.

And there is an urgency to Mark's gospel. You need to know who Jesus is, because if you are shaky or uncertain about it, if you believe that Jesus is less than Lord and God, that lesser belief about Jesus won't sustain you in the face of persecution. Many scholars believe that Mark's gospel was written for the church in Rome as they faced horrific persecution at the hands of the Emperor Nero, who turned Christians into a scapegoat after he himself caused a fire that burned through ten out of Rome's fourteen districts. Christians were clothed in animal hides and torn apart by dogs, or wrapped in wax and burned as candles to light Nero's garden parties. Following Jesus might cost you everything; are you sure you He's worth it? Only if you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.

¹ Garland, David. *Mark*, NIVAPP, Zondervan, (Grand Rapids, MI, 1996), 55.

And so Mark writes about the life of Jesus, and he calls it “the gospel.” When we hear the word today, we think “Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John”, but back in Mark’s day, a gospel was a royal announcement of good news. The king had just won a major victory, or his heir had just been born, or something like that. At the heart of these kingly good tidings was the idea that peace and prosperity were assured for the realm, because of what the king had done.

And so Mark announces royal good tidings about Jesus. Because of King Jesus, Messiah Jesus, we have good news for the world. “Gospel” is not just a fancy word for a new sort of biography that’s meant to give you information. Mark includes many details from Jesus’ life, but he isn’t trying to write a history book. He’s making an announcement. A gospel is more than just *news*; it’s *good* news. When you hear the gospel proclaimed, you need to choose: either Jesus is good news for the world, or He isn’t. Mark is announcing the good news of the beginning of the reign of King Jesus. Are you going to bow?

Where Matthew and Luke begin by tracing Jesus’ genealogy as a way of connecting Jesus with the story of Israel, the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Mark takes a more direct route by presenting the King’s Herald, John, as the prophesied Messenger that Isaiah spoke about. John came to prepare the way for Jesus in fulfillment of God’s promises.

And while Mark credits Isaiah like we might describe an ensemble movie by naming the lead actor, or maybe just our favorite actor, the quotation he gives actually comes from several places: Exodus 23:20, preparing God’s people to enter the promised land; Isaiah 40:3, speaking of Israel’s return from exile when the Lord pardons her and brings her home; and Malachi 3:1, where God sends His messenger to prepare the way for the Lord to bring the day of the Lord and purify His people.

The big idea of assembling this quotation from the law, the major prophets, and the minor prophets is to invoke the whole Bible as a testimony to what God would do to prepare His people for His coming. Their sin had placed them in exile, in the wilderness, out of fellowship with God. In order to set things right, God Himself would come and visit His people, but in His mercy, He would prepare them so that they could repent and avoid being caught up in judgment. The role of the messenger was to call the people to clean things up to honor the king and to avoid his wrath.

And that role fell to John, and it was a role he not only announced with words, but lived out through his actions. His ministry took place in the wilderness, and he announced a special washing ceremony to cleanse away sin. His baptism took place in the Jordan river, the ancient boundary of the promised land, reminding the people of the generation that wandered in the

wilderness under God's judgment before the next generation finally crossing the river to go and conquer. He's eating locusts and wild honey, calling to mind the devouring locusts of Egypt and the land flowing with milk and honey that God promised. He also dressed the part of a prophet, especially Elijah, who was known for wearing camels' hair and a leather belt. He's not just putting on a costume as a stunt, though; he's trying to let people know what kind of ministry and message to expect. He wants them to think: "If Elijah's here again, then our king must be wicked, and our kingdom must be in bad shape. God must be about to do something new! We need national repentance and a new king!"

And that's exactly what they did. They got the message – it's time for Israel to be renewed. And so all the country of Judea and Jerusalem went out to the wilderness, confessed their sins, and passed through the Jordan river in baptism. They weren't just re-enacting past events; they were entering into a new phase of Israel's history. They renewed their hearts, and they expected God to renew the promised land and the temple, and then the world.

And just like Moses prepared the way for Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan into the promised land, and just like Elijah's ministry gave way to Elisha's double-portioned ministry (and notice that all four of these men famously parted and passed through the waters), John the Baptizer announces that he is not the Christ; he is just the forerunner, the messenger.

And his message gives us a strange clue to work out: John claims that the one who comes after him will be *even mightier* than John himself. But how is John mighty? What miracles does he do? How does he do in his battle with the king? Remember, the great prophets always take on the kings. Moses smashes Pharaoh, Elijah constantly frustrates Ahab and reduces him to repentance; but how does John's clash with Herod go? Moses is taken away into death secretly at a good old age; Elijah famously ascends to heaven on chariots of fire, but what happens to John?

We're getting ahead of the story that will appear in chapter 6, but *either* John is a failed prophet who loses to King Herod, *or* there is some new secret weapon being tested that will completely reshape what victory means. John doesn't look like a powerful prophet; what should we expect from someone with even greater "power" than the ability to die at the hands of a king?

But in the immediate context, John is talking about baptismal power. Mark has quoted from Malachi; "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me." And then, v.2: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap." Israel needs cleansing, and the active ingredient in John's baptism is water, famous for its power to cleanse dirt, which happens to be what human

bodies are made of. But what if your problem isn't the dirt on your body but the sin on your soul? You need more than a bath, because water alone doesn't forgive sins.

And so John teaches his followers to expect a different sort of baptism from the Mighty One, a baptism of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism was like a wedding rehearsal, preparation for the real event. John's baptism marked out those who were ready to receive the coming Messiah, the baptism of Jesus would actually accomplish what all the previous washings pointed to, because Jesus baptized with the Holy Spirit. Everyone who repents and receives baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit receives the cleansing of forgiveness that prepares them for the coming of the Lord. Spirit-empowered baptism brings you out of the wilderness, and into the promised land, into the kingdom.

And so John says, "Get ready. Prepare the way. After me, He's coming." Who is Jesus? John says that He's the one who will lead us out of the wilderness, into the promised land. John says He's the one who will divide the Jordan for us to cross, and who will wash our sins away with the power of the Holy Spirit.

Now fast forward two thousand years. Mark gave us the *beginning* of the gospel, but now we know much more of the good news – Jesus came, and He was everything John said, and more. He won forgiveness for us by dying on the cross and rising again, and He ascended into heaven and gave us the gift of His Spirit. He is now extending His kingdom by a baptismal conquest of the promised land, and by the proclamation of the royal good tidings to everyone.

If you don't know Jesus; if you aren't sure who He is, then hear Mark's astonishing announcement that He is the Christ, the Son of God. And listen as Mark gives voice to John the Baptizer, who embodies the whole history of God's people to prepare the way for Jesus.

And if you already believe what Mark says, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, then you pray for His kingdom to come and His will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven. You receive His commission to disciple the nations with baptism and teaching. You remember that Jesus said that John the Baptizer was the greatest prophet ever born of woman, but that even the least of those who have been born again by water and Spirit is greater than John.

And if you believe this good news, you believe that Jesus is coming again. So hear and believe the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and in the power of the Spirit that filled Elijah, the Spirit that filled John, the Spirit that washed away your sins, prepare the way of the Lord.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*