

THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL

Mark 1:1-8

Introduction:

Last week we finished up the book of Ephesians. I was in a quandary about what to do next. In Acts 20 as Paul met with the Ephesian elders on his way to Jerusalem, knowing that he would probably never see them again in this life, he said to them, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God."

"The whole counsel of God..." In the teaching of the Word it is easy to get caught up with teaching and preaching favorite passages and themes and in so doing, ignore whole areas of Scripture. One of the areas I have always struggled with is preaching from the gospels or other narrative passages of Scripture. It is far easier to take doctrinal teaching, like the epistles, and expound on what it means and how it applies to us today.

However, in thinking and praying about it, I felt led look at Mark.

Comparison of the gospels:

- **John** focuses on Jesus as *God*. His purpose is to show the deity of Jesus (20:30-31). Much of the book is unique – specific events or details not mentioned in the other three accounts. This book was written specifically to provide us with a sure foundation for our trust in Jesus - in who he is, as well as in what he can do in our lives.

The other three gospels do not have as great a focus on Jesus' deity - although they do not totally neglect it, either. Their emphasis is on various aspects of Jesus as a *human* - who he was and what he did. In this respect, there are many points in common between them - synoptic.

- **Luke** – writing to a Gentile audience. As a physician, his focus is on the "human side" of Jesus – his birth, his life, his interactions with people. He deals with Jesus mission to bring hope and salvation to a world that was hopeless and dying.

- **Matthew** focuses on Jesus as the King, the one who fulfills all the promises given by the Old Testament prophets, regarding a coming Deliverer for the Jews. Matthew is clearly written for an educated Jewish audience, who knew the OT and the prophecies. He quotes extensively from the OT showing how Jesus' life and ministry fulfilled the promises of the prophets.
- **Mark** is an action-packed account of Jesus as a servant. Mark's gospel moves along very quickly. There are some events where he gives more detail than the other writers, but in most cases he is very concise and to the point. His target audience was also non-Jewish, and some of the Latin term he uses suggest that he was mainly writing for Roman readers.

Some background regarding the book of Mark:

Time of writing – many scholars believe that Mark was probably the first of the four gospels to be written down. The other gospel writers, particularly Matthew and Luke probably had read Mark's gospel and borrowed from it in the writing of their gospel accounts.

Author – John Mark, a young man who appears a number of times in the NT Scriptures. His mother was named Mary, and she was a rather wealthy woman who lived in Jerusalem. Her home seems to have been a meeting place for the believers in the early days of the church.

Acts 12 – Peter's deliverance from prison – he goes to Mary's house - "... he went to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose other name was Mark, where many were gathered together and were praying." (Ac 12:12 ESV)

John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas (Col. 4:10) and at the end of Acts 12, John Mark came with Paul and Barnabas when they returned to Antioch from Jerusalem. We also know that he accompanied them on their missionary journey as they travelled to Cyprus and on to Perga on the mainland of Asia Minor. He left them there – unknown reasons.

Later, Paul refused to take him along when they were planning to set out on another missionary trip. The result was that Paul and Barnabas split up, with Barnabas taking Mark and sailing to Cyprus.

At this point, Mark drops out of the picture for a while. The next we hear of him is in some of the epistles. He apparently became an associate of the apostle Peter, who mentions him with some affection in his first epistle, referring to him as "my son." Paul's letters to Philemon and the church in Colossae both mention John Mark, as an important fellow worker with Paul. Apparently, Paul's dispute with Mark had been forgiven, and Paul came to value Mark and his ministry.

The final mention of John Mark reinforces that bond between himself and the Apostle Paul. 2 Tim. 4:11 – Paul was all alone – asks Timothy to bring Mark with him to the prison in Rome...

Just one other note regarding Mark that is really just speculation – see Mark 14:51-52 – young man running away naked at Jesus arrest. Some scholars believe it was Mark, as only he mentions it.

So it would appear that Mark had some contact with Jesus over the although he would have been a fairly young man at that time. However, much of his knowledge of Christ's life probably came from Peter.

Theme of the Book of Mark:

I came across a series of messages on the gospel of Mark by Ray Stedman that date back over 40 years. He makes some interesting observations about the theme of this book and the way it is laid out.

Mark seems to be fascinated with two qualities of Jesus which he gives to us in the very first words of this gospel: *"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Jesus of Nazareth, a carpenter, the human Jesus -- but also the Son of God -- the Divine One. Mark seems fascinated by that combination—the Ruler who shows his ability to serve, and the Servant who knows how to rule. That, Stedman points out, is how the book is organized. Mark is very easy to outline. It falls readily into two halves. The first, Chapter 1 through Chapter 8, Verse 26, is The Servant Who Rules—the authority of the servant. The second, from Chapter 8, Verse 27 through to the end, is The Ruler Who Serves.

Mention the turning point in each of the gospels. Matt. 16:13-21; Mark 8:27-31; Luke 9:18-22 – the confession of Peter and Jesus' prediction of his coming death. John - not as clear – 13:1 – his hour had come.

The ESV Study Bible lists 8 key themes in the book of Mark:

1. Jesus seeks to correct messianic expectations and misunderstandings.
2. Jesus is man.
3. Jesus is the Son of God.
4. Jesus is the Son of Man with all power and authority.
5. Jesus as the Son of Man must suffer.
6. Jesus is Lord.
7. Jesus calls his followers to imitate him in humble service, self-denial, and suffering.
8. Jesus teaches on the kingdom of God, and implies that God continues to call a people to himself.

As you look at those themes you can see how they are summarized by the two thoughts, the servant who rules and the ruler who serves. Throughout the book we will see, as well, Jesus' call to us to imitate his humble service, self-denial and suffering.

Well, let's look into Mark's gospel...

Preparing the Way for Jesus

Read vv. 1-5. The beginning of the gospel – define gospel – glad tidings, good news. Mark begins his account of the good news of Christ with the ministry of John the Baptist.

- Sent to prepare the way for the coming of the Anointed One
- Proclaimed in the prophecies of the Old Testament
- He preached a message that spoke straight to people's need
- The people responded to the message

Mark begins his presentation of John by looking back to the OT prophets. He quotes the prophets to show that all of this was to be expected.

- Reference to Isaiah
- Actually quotes two prophets – Malachi and Isaiah
- Some scholars get all bent out of shape about Mark misquoting the OT. But he was not wrong or mistaken. He simply wanted to emphasize what Isaiah said. So he begins with Malachi, then Isaiah...

- Then he immediately identifies John as the fulfilment of that prophecy – John appeared, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
- People from all over Judea and Jerusalem were going out to hear his message and to be baptized.

We often think of John as being a rough, rugged man, almost abusive in his message to the people. Much of his recorded message was that as he addressed the religious leaders of his day. But I don't think that was typical of what he had to say. Why would people go out of their way to listen to a man who denigrates them and condemns them?

No, I think people were streaming to hear him because he had a message that touched them at their point of deepest need. It was a message that dealt with sin and guilt and shame. And that is the same need that people have today.

A Message of Repentance and Forgiveness

This is the message that people need to hear today. Whether they admit it or not, people struggle with sin and guilt and the associated shame that goes with it. And people are always looking for ways to alleviate their guilt and to atone for their sin and failure.

- Penance – self flagellation, punishing themselves to try to atone for their sin and shortcomings
- Benevolence – to try to pay for the failures they see in themselves
- Good deeds – as an attempt to balance out their sin and guilt

There are all kinds of ways people try to deal with their sin and guilt. But it doesn't work. None of those things work.

People of John's day were just like that. Living in a desert of sin, a wilderness of guilt. But then John came with a message that offered them a way out, a way to deal with their sin. It was a message of repentance and forgiveness.

And the people responded. They came by the dozens, hundreds, perhaps thousands, to repent of their sin and to be baptized by John as a sign of their repentance.

The Promise of Someone Greater

Both Mark and Matthew make a point of John the Baptist's simple lifestyle – his most basic of clothing and diet. Why would that matter? It must be important or why is it included. Ray Stedman makes an good observation about it. He says,

"...it is symbolic. But what does it symbolize? Well, you cannot wear anything more fundamental in the way of clothing, or eat a more basic diet, than John did. In other words, it is representative of his ministry -- one of simple beginnings. It is not the end; it is the beginning. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God is repentance on man's part. That is the place to begin."

But the message of John was not the whole message. He even said so himself. *Read vv. 7-8.* Repentance and forgiveness is just the beginning. John says there is someone coming who has so much more for you than what I have given.

And that also is symbolic of the Christian life. It begins with repentance and forgiveness. But there is a whole abundant life to be lived beyond that. There is life in the Spirit which comes through Jesus Christ. And that life is to be lived out by faith, through a daily walk with God.

Conclusion

But the starting place is repentance. The beginning of the good news is that there is forgiveness. Whatever you have done, however you have lived, whatever dark secrets may be hidden in your closet—there is forgiveness, if only we will come to God in repentance. If only we will confess our sin and turn from it, He promises forgiveness and cleansing and a new life.

That is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Have you repented? It is in repentance that God will meet you. It is there you will find forgiveness of sins. If you have never repented before, I urge you to do so now.

If there is something in your life that is causing guilt, this is the place to begin – repent of it, and God promises forgiveness. That is the starting point of a new life of victory.