

The Glory and the Scandal
Mark 1:1–20

Our text today is Mark 1:1–20. This opening has three promises and three fulfillments. It tells us about a promise, and then tells how it was kept, and then tells us a second promise, and how that was fulfilled, and then a third promise and fulfillment. That's the basic outline.

Here is what the three promises are: first, the promise of a forerunner. A forerunner is someone who runs ahead of someone important, announcing that someone important is coming right behind.

The Old Testament prophets said that before God's kingdom began, there would be a forerunner, an announcer. That's the first promise. The second promise is that the Messiah would come. And the third promise is that the kingdom of God would come.

These are the three promises: 1st, the forerunner or announcer; 2nd, the Messiah; and 3rd, the kingdom of God.

Mark's Title: *The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* (Mk 1:1)

This is how the good news began. "Gospel" equals "good news." V14 and v15 speak of "the good news." The NIV has translated it "gospel" in v1 and "good news" in vv14–15, which is fine with me, so long as you understand that it is the identical word in Greek. In first 20 verses, what we cover today, Mark tells us how the good news began.

We learn in the very first verse who Jesus is. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. The disciples figure it out at almost exactly the middle of Mark, and that's the most important turning point in Mark. But we readers know from the first verse.

First Promise – My Messenger will Come Ahead of Me to Prepare (Mark 1:2–3)

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.'"

In Old Testament prophecies, God was going to come to Israel and do a great work, and several times God says that he will send a messenger, a forerunner, ahead of him, to get the people ready for him. Mark writes this so that it is God speaking to Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, telling Jesus that God would send his messenger go ahead of Jesus, to get the people ready.

In Mark 1:3 God tells the Christ what the messenger, who is the forerunner, the announcer, will say: "Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him."

So the first promise comes from OT passages, and it is God promising to send the announcer in front of the Messiah, the Christ. For any first century Jews reading Mark, this would all have been familiar. They thought much about the kingdom of God, which the Old Testament prophets had promised. They wanted that kingdom to come. And they knew that part of what the prophets said was that an announcer would come first.

First Fulfillment – John the Baptist Appears (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.

"And so John came" - John is the messenger, the forerunner, the announcer. The promise said that the announcer would prepare the Lord's way and make his paths straight. We read twice about baptism and twice about the forgiveness of sins, one of those adds *repenting*, and one adds *confessing*.

So we learn here what it takes to get ready for the Lord: we *confess* sins, which means that we agree that we are sinners; and we *repent*, which means we decide to live in God's ways, we will aim our lives away from sin.

Confess, repent, and twice it says they were *baptized*, and twice that they were *forgiven*. Christian baptism puts Christ in the middle of this, but otherwise it's the same. This is just how Peter preached on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. We want to agree with God that we're sinners, we want to be forgiven, we want to live in God's ways; all good. How do we tell God this? We get baptized. In the New Testament, baptism is not becoming a more devoted Christian, it is part of becoming a Christian in the first place.

The challenge here is the children of the church. In the earliest churches, all the converts were adults, they were all first generation Christians. What did they do with the children that grew up in the church? We don't know, our NT writings don't cover that. So we consider children ready not earlier than the age of 12, because that is an old church tradition.

John baptized people who wanted to live in God's ways and wanted to be forgiven. Mark 1:5 tells us that many people came to John and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins! There was a great revival in Judea under John's ministry. This was John preparing the way for Christ and making straight paths for Christ.

Verse 6 tells us what kind of clothes John wore, and what he ate. The Gospel of Mark isn't really interested in clothes and food, even if they are odd. Malachi 4:5 says the forerunner, the announcer, will be like Elijah. And 2 Kings 1:8 describes Elijah's clothes and food, and it is a *lot* like how John the Baptist lived. Verse 6 is telling us that John the Baptist really is the promised announcer: he's just like Elijah.

Second Promise: A Greater One is Coming (Mark 1:7–8)

And 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."

The first promise came from the Old Testament prophets, and the second comes from John the Baptist, the promised announcer. Part of what a forerunner did was announce someone very important coming down the road after him. This John did: he announced Jesus. John was important, but he was nothing compared to the Coming One.

John promised that a very great one was coming right behind him, someone much more important than he was. John was not worthy to touch the feet of the Coming One. John was saying this to crowds that had confessed their sins and been baptized and forgiven. He was telling them, "your baptism and forgiveness are just the start, but someone else, a very great person, will come and take over from me."

Second Fulfillment: Jesus Arrives (Mark 1:9–13)

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; with you I am well pleased." 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 attended him.

"At that time Jesus came from Nazareth..." Jesus is the Coming One that John promised. We already know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, from Mark 1:1. Jesus' choice to be baptized is a big choice on his part. We don't know exactly what was happening, because we are not told more. I think that by being baptized, Jesus was agreeing to obey his Father's call to him. God was calling him, and he was baptized to say "yes" to God.

Mk 1:10–11 is for Jesus' own benefit. After he was baptized, *Jesus* saw the heavens being torn open, and the Spirit coming down. When Jesus was baptized, there was a huge reaction from heaven, and it was for Jesus himself to see. And the voice spoke directly to Jesus: "You are my Son, whom I love; with *you* I am well-pleased."

In some ways, Jesus was baptized for the same reasons we are. He did not need to repent or be forgiven. But when *we* are baptized, *we* are saying, "God in heaven, you have called me to live for you, and I am saying 'yes'." Jesus must have been saying much the same thing, "yes" to God, and it pleased his Father very much.

And, the Spirit came on Jesus, as John said. The Son was baptized, and he saw the heavens torn open! Something incredible was about to come from heaven to earth. The Spirit is what came down through the tear, and the Father spoke wonderful words.

John had said, the Coming One will surround you with the Holy Spirit. The heavens split apart and the Spirit came onto Jesus: HE is the One who can bathe us in the Spirit!

And *immediately* the Spirit sent Jesus out to be tempted by Satan 40 days. Spiritual high, spiritual low. Perhaps Jesus was "tempted" to think the amazing baptism events were not real after all, that he'd been misled. We might.

But the sequence of spiritually wonderful meeting with God himself, and then a time of severe testing right after, was initiated by the Spirit and was experienced by the Son. And, the severe testing lasted a lot longer than the spiritual high. But notice - angels were taking care of him. That happens to us, as well.

Third Promise: The Time has Come, the Kingdom has Arrived (Mark 1:14–15)

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!"

The work of God on earth faced opposition right from the start. As soon as Jesus had come forward to be baptized to accept his call, Satan gave him a very hard time for forty days. John was put in prison, and he did not come out alive. Let's not be too surprised when this is tough going.

"The time has come," Jesus said. "The kingdom of God is near." Quite literally, in Greek it says "the time has been fulfilled, the kingdom has arrived." What Jesus is saying, in effect, is, "The waiting is over, people. The kingdom of God has just pulled up, it has arrived. Start living in God's ways, and believe this good news."

The first two promises described something that would happen in the future: the announcer would come, and the Coming One would arrive. This third promise is not about the future, but about the present: *the waiting has ended, the kingdom has arrived.*

Third Fulfillment: Follow Me, I Will Make You what You Should Be (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.

Jesus called two sets of brothers, all grown working men, to follow him. It is a very simple story, and what is the most remarkable is their obedience. Jesus is walking down a road on the shore, he calls them, they put down what they are doing and join him.

Jesus calls and they follow, and Mark tells this way on purpose, so stark and blunt, uncomfortably simple, to teach us what being a disciple means, and what the kingdom of God looks like.

It is a mistake to separate vv16–20 from vv14–15. In vv14–15 Jesus said, "the waiting has ended, the kingdom has arrived." The trouble is, everything looks the same. What exactly "has arrived"? It doesn't seem like anything at all has happened! What does this "kingdom" look like? And *that* is the right question: what does this kingdom look like? That is the question vv16–20 answers.

It looks like: Jesus of Nazareth walking on an ordinary road, inviting men and women and children, one or two at a time, to follow him; and they put down what they're doing and they follow him. All of that is what the kingdom looks like.

Jesus said, "Follow me and I will make you fishers of people." Jesus knew that he would send out those four as apostles. He does not make all of us into apostles or evangelists. But there's still encouragement here: the words "I will make you." "Follow me, and **I will make you** what you should be." "Follow me and **I will make you** what I want you to be." Your job and mine: follow him. His job (and it's a big one): make us what he wants us to be. I like that a lot. Let's follow him.

The kingdom of God could also be called the rule of God. Now, we would expect, that when God begins to rule on earth, amazing things would happen! With power and glory, God would end evil and sickness, and evil people would be judged with fire and brimstone, governments will be overthrown, and God will set up a Throne on earth, and trees and rivers and fields will be wonderful. Like heaven on earth.

The Old Testament prophets promised that God would rule on earth, and they talk like that. Jesus said: "the waiting has ended, God ruling on earth has begun." I called this sermon "the glory and the scandal." The glory of the good news is that God's rule on earth has begun. It began with John the Baptist and Jesus.

When a person decides to repent, to be baptized and follow Jesus, they become citizens of a new government, with God as Ruler and Christ the Son sitting at his right hand. And understand that the kingdom Jesus has in mind is an earthly rule. The Old Testament prophets *always* spoke of what would happen on earth. Jesus preached that God's rule *on earth* had begun. This rule of God on earth will eventually completely take over *on earth*. Christians are *not* simply people who have their sins forgiven and try to live good lives. We have joined a new government, a revolution, that will eventually take over!

This is the glory of Christianity: that God has begun his rule on earth, *his good news revolution*, and that we who follow Jesus are part of this new government and nation; and because it is the rule of God Himself, He will rule completely, before this is over!

The scandal is that it *does not look like* the power of God or the glory of God. *It looks like* a couple scruffy fishermen putting down nets and following a Galilean preacher. *It looks like* tired KCCrs, loving each other, gathering to pray together, singing songs of praise and hope, eating together, including the Lord's Supper, and listening to the teaching of the apostles. And then they go out, and do their best to live as Jesus their king called them to live.

And you *do* it, again and again, and you *do* it where sorrow and pain continue, where darkness and temptations continue. That's the scandal, because it doesn't look like the rule of God. If you want the rule of God now, in one picture, one photograph, it is Jesus calling these four men, two at a time, and they obey.

The waiting has ended, the kingdom of God has arrived. Follow me and I will make you what I want you to be. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord Jesus, we want to be in on this. Whatever it means for us now to follow you like those first four, you have made us hungry for that. We are not fishing in Galilee, so it will look different for us. But we want our simple "yes I will follow you" to be the guiding light in our lives. Make us what you want us to be. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.