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God's Servant Is Here!

Mark 1

"The Gospel is neither a discussion nor a debate," said Dr. Paul S. Rees. "It is an announcement!"

Mark wasted no time giving that announcement, for it is found in the opening words of his book. Matthew, who wrote primarily for the Jews, opened his book with a genealogy. After all, he had to prove to his readers that Jesus Christ is indeed the rightful heir to David's throne. Since Luke focused mainly on the sympathetic ministry of the Son of man, he devoted the early chapters of his book to a record of the Saviour's birth. Luke emphasized Christ's humanity, for he knew that his Greek readers would identify with the perfect Babe who grew up to be the Perfect Man.

John's Gospel begins with a statement about eternity! Why? Because John wrote to prove to the whole world that Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the Son of God (John 20:31). The *subject* of John's Gospel is the deity of Christ, but the *object* of his Gospel is to encourage his readers to believe on this Saviour and receive the gift of eternal life.

Where does Mark's Gospel fit in? Mark wrote for the Ro-

mans, and his theme *is Jesus Christ the Servant*. If we had to pick a "key verse" in this Gospel, it would be 10:45—"For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

The fact that Mark wrote with the Romans in mind helps us understand his style and approach. The emphasis in this Gospel is on *activity*. Mark describes Jesus as He busily moves from place to place and meets the physical and spiritual needs of all kinds of people. One of Mark's favorite words is "straightway," meaning "immediately." He uses it forty-one times. Mark does not record many of our Lord's sermons because his emphasis is on what Jesus did rather than what Jesus said. He reveals Jesus as God's Servant, sent to minister to suffering people and to die for the sins of the world. Mark gives us no account of our Lord's birth, nor does he record a genealogy, unnecessary in regard to a servant.

In this opening chapter, Mark shares three important facts about God's Servant.

1. The Servant's Identity (Mark 1:1-11)

How does Mark identify this Servant? He records the testimonies of several dependable witnesses to assure us that Jesus is all that He claims to be.

John Mark, the author of the book, is the first witness (v. 1); and he states boldly that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. It is likely that Mark was an eyewitness of some of the events that he wrote about. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary; and their home was a meeting place for believers in the city (Acts 12:1-19). Several scholars believe that Mark was the young man described in Mark 14:51-52. Since Peter called Mark "my son" (1 Peter 5:13), it is probable that it was Peter who led Mark to faith in Jesus Christ. Church tradition states that Mark was "Peter's interpreter," so that the Gospel of Mark reflects the personal experiences and witness of Simon Peter.

The word *gospel* simply means "the good news." To the Romans, Mark's special target audience, "gospel" meant "joyful news about the emperor." The "Gospel of Jesus Christ" is the Good News that God's Son has come into the world and died for our sins. It is the Good News that our sins can be forgiven, that we can belong to the family of God and one day go to live with God in heaven. It is the announcement of victory over sin, death, and hell (1 Cor. 15:1-8, 51-52; Gal. 1:1-9).

The second witness is that of *the prophets* (Mark 1:2-3). Mark cites two quotations from the Old Testament prophets, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. (note also Ex. 23:20.) The words *messenger* and *voice* refer to John the Baptist, the prophet God sent to prepare the way for His Son (Matt. 3; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:19-34). In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. This included both repairing the roads and preparing the people. By calling the nation to repentance, John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah and Malachi join voices in declaring that Jesus Christ is the Lord, Jehovah God.

John the Baptist is the next witness (Mark 1:4-8), the man Jesus called the greatest of the prophets (Matt. 11:1-15). In his dress, manner of life, and message of repentance, John identified with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8; Mal. 4:5; Matt. 17:10-13; and note Luke 1:13-17). The "wilderness" where John ministered is the rugged wasteland along the western shore of the Dead Sea. John was telling the people symbolically that they were in a "spiritual wilderness" far worse than the physical wilderness which their ancestors had endured for forty years. John called the people to leave their spiritual wilderness, trust their "Joshua" (Jesus), and enter into their inheritance.

John was careful to magnify Jesus and not himself (see John 3:25-30). John would baptize repentant sinners in water, but "the coming One" would baptize them with the Spirit (Acts

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1:4-5). This did not mean that John's baptism was unauthorized (see Matt. 21:23-27), or that water baptism would one day be replaced by Spirit baptism (see Matt. 28:19-20). Rather, John's message and baptism were *preparation* so that the people would be ready to meet and trust the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Our Lord's apostles were no doubt baptized by John (see John 4:1-2 and Acts 1:21-26).

The Father and the Holy Spirit are Mark's final witnesses to the identity of God's Servant (Mark 1:9-11). When Jesus was baptized, the Spirit came upon Him as a dove, and the Father spoke from heaven and identified His beloved Son. The people who were there did not hear the voice or see the dove, but Jesus and John did (see John 1:29-34). The word *beloved* not only declares affection, but it also carries the meaning of "the only one." The Father's announcement from heaven reminds us of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.

You will want to note these references in Mark's Gospel to Jesus Christ as the Son of God—1:1, 11; 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 12:1-11; 13:32; 14:61-62; and 15:39. Mark did not write his book about just any Jewish servant. He wrote his book about the very Son of God who came from heaven to die for the sins of the world.

Yes, Jesus is the Servant—but He is a most unusual Servant. After all, it is the servant who prepares the way for others and announces their arrival. But *others* prepared the way for Jesus and announced that He had come! Even heaven itself took note of Him! This Servant is God the Son.

2. The Servant's Authority (Mark 1:12-28)

We expect a servant to be *under authority* and to *take* orders, but God's Servant *exercises* authority and gives orders—even to demons—and His orders are obeyed. In this section, Mark describes three scenes that reveal our Lord's authority as the Servant of God.

Scene One—His temptation (1:12-13). Mark does not give as

full an account of the temptation as do Matthew (4:1-11) and Luke (4:1-13); and John adds some vivid details that the others omit. The Spirit "driveth Him" into the wilderness. This is a strong word that Mark will use eleven times to describe the casting out of demons. It is *impelled* in the *New American* and *sent* in the *New International*. It does not suggest that our Lord was either unwilling or afraid to face Satan. Rather, it is Mark's way of showing the intensity of the experience. No time was spent basking in the glory of the heavenly voice or the presence of the heavenly dove. The Servant had a task to perform and He immediately went to do it.

In concise form, Mark presents us with two symbolic pictures. Our Lord's forty *days* in the wilderness remind us of Israel's forty *years* in the wilderness. Israel failed when they were tested, but our Lord succeeded victoriously. Having triumphed over the enemy, Jesus could now go forth and call a new people who would enter into their spiritual inheritance. Since the *name Jesus* is the Greek form of "Joshua," we can see the parallel.

The second picture is that of the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam was tested in a beautiful garden and failed; but Jesus was tempted in a dangerous wilderness and won the victory. Adam lost his "dominion" over Creation because of his sin (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8), but in Christ, that dominion has been restored for all who trust Him (Heb. 2:6-8). Jesus was with the wild beasts and they did not harm Him. He gave a demonstration of that future time of peace and righteousness, when the Lord shall return and establish His kingdom (Isa. 11:9; 35:9). Indeed, He is a Servant with authority!

Scene Two—His preaching (1:14-22). If ever a man spoke God's truth with authority, it was Jesus Christ (see Matt. 7:28-29). It has been said that the scribes spoke *from* authorities but that Jesus spoke *with authority*. Mark was not recording here the beginning of our Lord's ministry, since He had

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already ministered in other places (John 1:35-4:4). He is telling us why Jesus left Judea and came to Galilee: Herod had arrested John the Baptist, and wisdom dictated that Jesus relocate. By the way, it was during this journey that Jesus talked with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-45).

Our Lord's message was the Gospel of the kingdom of God, or "the Gospel of God" as some texts read. No doubt most of the Jews read "political revolution" into the phrase "kingdom of God," but that was not what Jesus had in mind at all. His kingdom has to do with His reign in the lives of His people; it is a spiritual realm and not a political organization. The only way to enter God's kingdom is by believing the Good News and being born again (John 3:1-7).

The Gospel is called "the Gospel of God" because it comes from God and brings us to God. It is "the Gospel of the kingdom" because faith in the Saviour brings you into His kingdom. It is the "Gospel of Jesus Christ" because He is the heart of it; without His life, death, and resurrection, there would be no Good News. Paul called it "the Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24) because there can be no salvation apart from grace (Eph. 2:8-9). There is only one Gospel (Gal. 1:1-9), and it centers in what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross (1 Cor. 15:1-11).

Jesus preached that people should repent (change their minds) and believe (see Acts 20:21). Repentance alone is not enough to save us, even though God expects believers to turn from their sins. We must also put positive faith in Jesus Christ and believe His promise of salvation. Repentance without faith could become remorse, and remorse can destroy people who carry a burden of guilt (see 2 Cor. 7:8-10; Matt. 27:3-5).

Because Jesus preached with authority, He was able to call men from their regular occupations and make them His disciples. Who else could interrupt four fishermen at their work and challenge them to leave their nets and follow Him? Several

months before, Jesus had already met Peter, Andrew, James, and John; and they had come to trust Him (see John 1:35-49). This was not their initial call to faith and salvation; it was an initial call to discipleship. The fact that Zebedee had hired servants suggests that his fishing business was successful and that he was *a* man of means. It also assures us that James and John did not mistreat their father when they heeded Christ's call. With the help of his servants, Zebedee could still manage the business.

Jesus did not invent the term "fishers of men." In that day, it was a common description of philosophers and other teachers who "captured men's minds" through teaching and persuasion. They would "bait the hook" with their teachings and "catch" disciples. It is likely that as many as seven of our Lord's disciples were fishermen (John 21:1-3). Surely the good qualities of successful fishermen would make for success in the difficult ministry of winning lost souls: courage, the ability to work together, patience, energy, stamina, faith, and tenacity. Professional fishermen simply could not afford to be quitters or complainers!

Jesus ministered not only in the open air but also in the synagogues. The Jewish synagogues developed during the nation's exile when the people were in Babylon after the temple had been destroyed. Wherever there were ten Jewish men above the age of twelve, a synagogue could be organized. The synagogue was not a place of sacrifice—that was done at the temple—but of reading the Scriptures, praying and worshipping God. The services were led, not by priests, but by laymen; and the ministry was supervised by a board of elders which was presided over by a "ruler" (Mark 5:22). It was customary to ask visiting rabbis to read the Scriptures and teach, which explains why Jesus had such freedom to minister in the synagogues. The Apostle Paul also took advantage of this privilege (Acts 13:14-16; 14:1; 17:1-4).

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Our Lord had set up His headquarters in Capernaum, possibly in or near the home of Peter and Andrew (Mark 1:29). You may see the remains of a Capernaum synagogue when you visit the Holy Land today, but it is not the one in which Jesus worshiped. The people assembled for services on the Sabbath as well as on Mondays and Thursdays. Being a faithful Jew, Jesus honored the Sabbath by going to the synagogue; and when He taught the Word, the people were astonished at His authority.

You will discover as you read Mark's Gospel that he delights in recording the emotional responses of people. The congregation in the synagogue was "astonished" at His teaching and "amazed" at His healing powers (v. 27; also note 2:12; 5:20, 42; 6:2, 51; 7:37; 10:26; 11:18). You even find Mark recording our Lord's amazement at the unbelief of the people in Nazareth (6:6). There is certainly nothing monotonous about this narrative!

Scene Three—His command (1:23-28). We wonder how many synagogue services that man had attended without revealing that he was demonized. It took the presence of the Son of God to expose the demon; and Jesus not only exposed him, but He also commanded him to keep quiet about His identity and to depart from the man. The Saviour did not want, nor did He need, the assistance of Satan and his army to tell people who He was (see Acts 16:16-24).

The demon certainly knew exactly who Jesus was (see Acts 19:13-17) and that he had nothing in common with Him. The demon's use of plural pronouns shows how closely he was identified with the man through whom he was speaking. The demon clearly identified Christ's humanity ("Jesus of Nazareth") as well as His deity ("the Holy One of God"). He also confessed great fear that Jesus might judge him and send him to the pit. There are people today just like this demonized man: in a religious meeting, able to tell who Jesus is, and even

trembling with fear of judgment—yet lost! (See James 2:19.)

"Hold thy peace!" literally means "Be muzzled!" Jesus would use the same words when stilling the storm (Mark 4:39). The demon tried one last convulsive attack, but then had to submit to the authority of God's Servant and come out of the man. The people in the synagogue were amazed and afraid. They realized that something new had appeared on the scene—a new doctrine and a new power. Our Lord's *words* and *works* must always go together (John 3:2). The people kept on talking about both, and the fame of Jesus began to spread. Our Lord did not encourage this kind of public excitement lest it create problems with both the Jews and the Romans. The Jews would want to follow Him only because of His power to heal them, and the Romans would think He was a Jewish insurrectionist trying to overthrow the government. This explains why Jesus so often told people to keep quiet (Mark 1:44; 3:12; 5:43; 7:36-37; 8:26, 30; 9:9). The fact that they did not obey created problems for Him.

3. The Servant's Sympathy (Mark 1:29-45)

Two miracles of healing are described in this section, both of which reveal the compassion of the Saviour for those in need. In fact, so great was His love for the needy that the Saviour ministered to great crowds of people after the Sabbath had ended, when it was lawful for them to come for help. It would appear that God's Servant was at the beck and call of all kinds of people, including demoniacs and lepers; and He lovingly ministered to them all.

Jesus and the four disciples left the synagogue and went to Peter and Andrew's house for their Sabbath meal. Perhaps Peter was a bit apologetic because his wife had to care for her sick mother and was unable to entertain them in the usual manner. We do not know about the other disciples, but we do know that Peter was a married man (1:30).

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Peter and Andrew not only brought their friends James and John home with them from the service, but they also brought the Lord home. That is a good example for us to follow: don't leave Jesus at the church—take Him home with you and let Him share your blessings and your burdens. What a privilege it was for Peter and his family to have the very Son of God as guest in their humble home. Before long, the Guest became the Host, just as one day the Passenger in Peter's boat would become the Captain (Luke 5:1-11).

By faith, the men told Jesus about the sick woman, no doubt expecting Him to heal her. That is exactly what He did! The fever left her immediately, and she was able to go to the kitchen and serve the Sabbath meal. If you have ever had a bad fever, then you know how painful and uncomfortable it is. You also know that after the fever leaves you, it takes time for you to regain your strength. But not so in this case! She was able to serve the Lord immediately. And isn't service to our Lord one of the best ways to thank Him for all He has done for us?

What was the result of this miracle? When the Sabbath ended at sundown, the whole city showed up at Peter's door! They brought their sick and afflicted, and the Lord (who was no doubt weary) healed them all. The Greek verb indicates that they "kept on bringing" people to Him, so that He must have gone to sleep at a very late hour. Note in Mark 1:32 the clear distinction made between the diseased and the demonized. While Satan can cause physical affliction, not all sickness is caused by demonic power.

Late hours did not keep Jesus from His appointed meeting with His Father early the next morning. Read Isaiah 50:4 for a prophetic description of God's righteous Servant as He meets the Lord morning by morning. What an example for us to follow! It is no surprise that Jesus had such authority and power when His prayer life was so disciplined (see Mark 9:28-29; 6:46; 14:32-38).

However, the crowds wanted to see Jesus again, not to hear His word, but to experience His healing and see Him perform miracles. Peter was surprised that Jesus did not hasten to meet the crowds but instead left for other towns where He might preach the Gospel. Peter did not realize the shallowness of the crowds, their unbelief, and their lack of appetite for the Word of God. Jesus said it was more important for Him to preach the Gospel in other places than to stay there and heal the sick. He did not permit popular acclaim to change His priorities.

Perhaps we can understand our Lord's concern for a feverish woman, but that He would meet *and touch* a leper is somewhat beyond our understanding. Lepers were supposed to keep their distance and warn everyone that they were coming, lest others would be defiled (Lev. 13:45-46). This man knew that Jesus was *able* to heal him, but he was not sure the Master was *willing* to heal him. Lost sinners today have the same unnecessary concern, for God has made it abundantly clear that He is not willing that sinners perish (2 Peter 3:9) and that He is willing that all men be saved (1 Tim. 2:4).

When you read the "tests" for leprosy described in Leviticus 13, you can see how the disease is a picture of sin. Like sin, leprosy is deeper than the skin (v. 3); it spreads (vv. 5-8); it defiles and isolates (vv. 44-46); and it renders things fit only for the fire (vv. 47-59). Anyone who has never trusted the Saviour is spiritually in worse shape than this man was physically.

Jesus had compassion on the man (note 6:34; 8:2; 9:22) and healed him. He did it with His touch and with His Word. No doubt this was the first loving touch this leper had felt in a long time. As with the fever, so with the leprosy: it was gone instantly!

For reasons already stated, Jesus commanded the man not to tell everybody. He was to go to the priests and follow the instructions given in Leviticus 14, so that he might be declared

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clean and received back into the social and religious life of the community. However, the man disobeyed orders. Jesus told this man to keep quiet, and yet he told everybody. Jesus commands us to tell everybody—and we keep quiet! The crowds that came to get help from Jesus created a serious problem for Him and probably hindered Him from teaching the Word as He intended to do (Mark 1:38).

The ceremony described in Leviticus 14 presents a beautiful picture in type of the work of redemption. The two birds represent two different aspects of our Lord's ministry: His incarnation and death (the bird put into the jar and then killed), and His resurrection and ascension (the bird stained with the blood and then set free). The blood was applied to the man's right ear (God's Word), right thumb (God's work), and right great toe (God's walk). Then the oil was put on the blood, symbolizing the Holy Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit cannot come on human flesh until first the blood has been applied.

We should learn some important spiritual lessons from this chapter. To begin with, if the Son of God came as a servant, then being a servant is the highest of all callings. We are never more like the Lord Jesus than when we are serving others. Second, God shares His authority with His servants. Only those who are *under* authority have the right to *exercise* authority. Finally, if you are going to be a servant, be sure you have compassion; because people will come to you for help and rarely ask if it is convenient!

Yet, what a privilege it is to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ and meet the needs of others by being one of God's compassionate servants.