**The Good News Begins**
**Mark 1:1-13**

We're beginning our new series in the gospel of Mark, a book one New Testament scholar calls a story 'on steroids'. Because the other gospels might headline Jesus' teaching, but Mark concentrates on Jesus' actions… and it is high energy stuff! In fact, as we'll see, one of Mark's favourite words is 'immediately': no sooner has Jesus done one thing he's off doing another.

But Mark's point is not to present Jesus as some kind of action man. It's to make you face a question: 'Who is this man?'

In fact, as Mark tells us all the extraordinary things Jesus did, and the awe and opposition that created in others, it builds to the pivot point of the book, as Jesus turns to his disciples and asks: 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mark 8:29).

Now, you and I live in an age where the question of identity increasingly defines life. The public square is mired in identity politics; institutions and nations experience crises of identity; and there's a social contagion of sexual identity among young people. Who am I? And who shall I say I am?

But what Mark wants you to do is look at this man Jesus of Nazareth and decide for yourself, who is he?

And that is a far more important question even than 'Who am I?' Because it's the answer you give to who Jesus is that will have defining power in your own life. Even as it's had defining power over Western civilisation to date.

You see, right from the first mention of this book in the historical literature, people have recognised that it was written by Mark, Peter's protégé. And Peter, of course, was one of Jesus' closest disciples. And he wrote it around 60AD to pass on Peter's teaching. So as you read this, you get to read probably the earliest eyewitness account of what went on around Jesus.

So today, we're going to look at Mark's opening: at what the Good news is, why we need it, and how we can receive it.

**What the Good News Is**
Look at v1: 'The beginning of the gospel…'. Now when our girls were small they loved dressing up and putting on little plays for us. Except, as a parent, you learn something pretty quick: that before your kids start a show they've got to promise something: it has a beginning, a middle, and most importantly, an end.

So when Mark tells us, this is the beginning, he's saying: this is an account that's going somewhere.

But he's telling you something else as well. Because if you were reading this in Greek, and the Old Testament in Greek, like the people Mark's writing to were doing, you'd have noticed something: that the way Mark starts this echoes the start of the very first book of the Bible, Genesis, which begins,'In the beginning God created…' And it's as if Mark is saying, 'And what I'm about to tell you is the beginning of a *new* beginning, of God's *new* creation'

And maybe you long for something like that. Maybe you look at the world, or at your life, and you wish things could start over. And Mark is saying, they can, and they will, because they have.

Because that's what 'gospel' means. It means something great that's already happened. We tend to think gospel means something religious. But it wasn't. It was the word in the streets for good news or glad tidings. And a herald would proclaim: 'the king has won a victory; the queen has given birth to a son; an amnesty is announced for rebels.' Something has happened and it's good news. In fact, in one ancient inscription, there's a reference to the birthday of Caesar Augustus: 'the birthday of the god [Augustus] was for the world *the beginning of his good news*…'. The beginning of the gospel of Augustus. Is Mark deliberately echoing that for the citizens of Rome he's writing to? Possibly, even probably. But this isn't good news about the latest autocratic politician. It's not even the beginning of the story of a great teacher, or philosopher. It's about someone far greater.

Look at v1 again: 'The beginning of the gospel *of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*.' So, the gospel's not a set of instructions for personal improvement. It's not a 12 step guide to personal wholeness. It's not a path to enlightenment. It's a person. This new start we all need, this new thing God is doing, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Now, we can tend to think of *Christ* as Jesus' surname, like he could be Jesus Smith, or worse, Slack. But it's not. It's his title. It's greek for Messiah - the Anointed One. And in ancient Israel three people were anointed with oil: prophets, priests and kings. But with time, the Anointed One, the Messiah, came to mean the longed for king, the greater Son of David, who would come and put everything right.

So, even though Mark wants you to grapple with, 'who is this guy?', this is no mystery thriller. Right from the first line Mark gives the plot away. Who is he? He's the Christ, he's the longed for king.

Which means the beginning of the good news is also the beginning of confrontation. Because deep down, we want to be king. We want to be the ones who decide for ourselves who we are, what's right and wrong, what we can or can't do. 'Well' Mark says, 'I've got good news for you. There's another king, the greatest of all kings, and you're going to have to contend with him.'

And contend we must, because he's not just a king, Mark says, he's the Son of God.

It's why John the Baptist says, v7, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." Now, in Judaism, the disciple of a Rabbi had to do everything for his teacher that a slave would do - *except* removing his sandals. That was considered too humiliating for a Jewish person to do. Only a gentile slave could do that. And John says, I'm not worthy even to do that. Compared to Jesus, I'm lower than the lowest of slaves.

I read a story in the press the other week about a young American student who was going to Italy on an exchange trip. And her Dad was of Italian extraction - so her parents bought her a DNA kit, so she could check her heritage and try and meet up with long lost family members when she arrived in Italy. Except the test showed she had zero Italian blood. In fact, further tests showed she was not related to her father in any way. She'd been born by assisted conception and it turns out there'd been a mix up in the lab, and she was the biological daughter of some other man. And so an attempt to help her find her roots left her totally uprooted: who was she?

But the reverse is also true. Because when you know who you are, whose son you are, whose daughter you are, who your family is, that can give you a real stability in life.

But the good news of Jesus goes even further, because when you know whose Son he is, and you find your identity in him, that can give you a rootedness like nothing else can.

**Why You Need It**
And Mark begins by taking us to the Old Testament: v2, 'As it is written in Isaiah the prophet…'. Except the quote he gives is a composite of three.

Verse 2 again, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face." And that's from Exodus 23:20, where God says he will send a messenger, an angel, ahead of the people of Israel as he leads them out of slavery in Egypt, across the desert, and into the Promised Land. And Mark is saying, in our day God has done it again. And this messenger, v2, "Will prepare your way." And that's a quote from Malachi 3:1, of how God will send a messenger to prepare the way for God himself to return to his people and his temple. And that messenger, Mark is saying, was John the Baptist, who, as Malachi predicted, would resemble Elijah. But then in v3, there's the quote from Isaiah 40:3, "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

And through the prophets, God had warned Israel that if they did not turn from their sins, and stay faithful to their covenant with God, all the curses of the covenant would fall on them, culminating in the greatest curse of all - being cut off from the presence of God and exiled from the Promised Land. Which is exactly what happened.

But then comes Isaiah 40, which Mark quotes, where God says, but after that exile I'm going to gather back all my scattered people. I'm going to bring about a second exodus. And yet, as you read Isaiah, you realise this vision far exceeds Israel simply getting back into the Promised Land. It's a vision of everything being put right, of creation being restored, of valleys being lifted up and mountains being levelled, of God's glory coming, and him gathering his people like sheep close to his chest and bringing them home to him.

And Mark is saying, that's what we all need. We all need an end to our exile. We all need deliverance from slavery. We all need the curse of sin to be overturned. Because outside of Christ we all live in exile from God. Now, we may get glimpses of him - in the beauty of the world or the love of others, but we don't see him or know him as he really is. We don't even really know ourselves. And deep down we long for that to be made right. Deep down we know the world is wrong, that we're wrong, and we're homesick for home. And we try and fill that longing with things that satisfies for a bit, but they don't last, so we need more, and we end up chasing after and serving the thing we thought would serve us. To use the Bible's language, we end up enslaved.

And Mark is saying, well, this good news is the story of how God is going to set you free and bring you home to the home you long for.

You see, it's not just Israel who had a problem with sin that cut them off from God. We all do. It's why John does what he does in the desert: v4, 'John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.' And people came to him from all over Judea and Jerusalem, v5, 'confessing their sins.'

But think who these people are who are coming to him. They're Jews. These are people who live good, upright lives, who worship God and go to the temple. And John is calling *them* to repent and

find forgiveness. Because sin isn't just a problem for those we tend to think of as sinful. It's a problem for the religious and the highly moral. Because our pride in our moral superiority, and our self-righteousness from obeying the rules, can cut us off from God just as surely as breaking all the rules.

It's why John *baptising* Jewish people is so surprising. Because baptism was an entry rite for gentiles wanting to convert to Judaism. And here is John saying, 'no, even if you're a Jew, even if you consider yourself a member of God's people, even if you're a highly moral person, you too need to be converted, you too need forgiveness. Your ethnic identity is not enough. Your moral record is not enough. You need that debt of sin - whether of your law breaking, or your self-righteous law keeping - lifted off you. You need to be brought home from exile.

So, maybe you look at your life and hate what you see and you know sin has stained you, and you feel your separation from God. Or, maybe you look at your life and like what you see and think God should be pleased to have you on his team. Well, what Mark is saying is that we all need to hear this voice calling in the wilderness. We all need forgiveness and we all need to be brought home Isaiah. We all need the good news.

But there's another reason we need it. Jesus is baptised; the Spirit descends on him; he hears God the Father affirm who he is, and then, v12-13, 'The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals.' And the world we live in is stunningly beautiful, but it can also be dark and dangerous. And Mark doesn't go into the details of Jesus' temptations. He just wants you to see the big picture: that it's not just that you struggle with sin. It's that you have an adversary. Because that's what 'satan' means: an adversary, an opponent, an enemy of all that is good. It means there is such a thing as evil and it's personal.

Now, maybe you think believing in a personal devil is all very primitive, and we should move on from such beliefs. But take a look at the world. And ask yourself, does the view of secular liberalism, that by nature we're really good people, and we just need a helping hand, and morality is all relative, better explain the reality of the world with it's wars and threats; and oppression and human and drug trafficking, or does what the Bible says: that there are real and dark principalities and powers who want to steal, kill and destroy?

And Mark begins this account by telling us - this is the world we live in. A world were you face an adversary. And none of us are up to that battle alone. We need a power greater than our sin and greater than our adversary. So we need the gospel.

**How You Can Receive It**

And out in the desert, John was preaching, v7-9: "After me comes he who is mightier than I… I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." Which would have made the people sit up and listen, because in the Old Testament it's God who pours out his Spirit on people. And through the prophets he'd said a time would come when he would put his Spirit in people's hearts and change their hearts. That by his Spirit he'd get at the root of our sin and why we sin. And here is John saying, that time has come. The One coming after me has the power to create in you a new heart.

And then Jesus comes. Verse 9: 'In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee.' And look what he does: v9 again, he 'was baptised by John in the Jordan.' Now, why would a man who later on no one could accuse of any sin undergo a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? Because, as he stood in that queue to be baptised, he was standing in line with us. He was identifying with us.

And as he came up out of the water, v10, 'Immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.' And through Isaiah God had said that a king from the family tree of David would come, 'And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord' (Is 11:2) And under that king, Isaiah said, the poor would be lifted up and the wicked put down; and creation will be made new and the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord. And Mark is saying, that king has come and he's Jesus.

The question is, how is he going to do it? How is a man from the backwaters of Galilee going to deal with our sin and bring us home from exile, and defeat our adversary, and make all things new?

Well, look again at what God the Father says to him, v11: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." And nearly every commentator I read said the same thing. That when God the Father describes Jesus as his beloved Son, he's echoing the words he said to Abraham when he told Abraham to take Isaac, *his* son, 'your beloved son, the son whom you love', up the mountain and sacrifice him. But Isaac was spared by a ram caught by its head in a thicket of thorns.

And they also agree that when God says of Jesus, 'with you I am well pleased', he's echoing the words he speaks over the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42, 'My servant… in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him" (Is 42:1). The same servant who in Isaiah 53 will give his life for the sins of his people.

But if Mark's book begins with heaven being torn open and God the Father saying 'this is my beloved son', as it closes we get the only other place Mark uses the verb for being torn open - as Jesus dies on the cross: Mark 15:38: '*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two*, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, *"Truly this man was the Son of God."'* And those two tearings apart, those two declarations of Jesus being the Son of God, stand like book ends to the whole book.

Because the curtain in the temple was the tangible, physical symbol of our exile, of humanity's alienation from God, blocking the way to the place where God dwelt. But as Jesus, the Son of God, died that barrier was torn in two and the way home was opened.

You see, Isaac, *Abraham's* beloved son was spared, but God's beloved Son was not. A substitute was provided for Isaac, but not for Jesus. Why not? Because he was the substitute, because as he identified with us in his baptism, he identified with us in his death. And at the cross, he took our place and paid for every sin so that we might experience the forgiveness and grace of God and come home. And as we put our trust in him, his death becomes our death, and his righteousness becomes our righteousness. And God the Father sees you in him and says over you, as he said over Jesus: This is my beloved child, with you I am well pleased.

And when you know that it will give you a rooted and grounded and stable identity. It'll give you an answer to who am I?, because you know you are a child loved by your heavenly Father.

But that's not all Jesus does. You see after having the Spirit descend on him, and after hearing God declare his love for him, you might expect some kind of celebration mightn't you? Something akin to a coming of age feast; a party. But what do you get? You get a battle, as Christ the king goes to war.

Verses 12-13 again: 'The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan.' In his first letter John writes, 'The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8). And three other people are called sons of God in the Bible - Adam, the kings of Israel, and Israel itself. And all three failed. All three fell before the adversary. But Jesus comes as *the* Son of God. He comes as the Second Adam, the ultimate king, the true Israel, and when he comes he goes straight to the task. And he experiences what we all experience - wilderness, temptation, and attack, but unlike us, he doesn't fail.

And the writer to the Hebrews says it's the fact that He was tempted in every way, yet was without sin, that gives us confidence to draw near God's throne of grace, and receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. You see, our sin will never make us confident in prayer, or asking for God's help in life, will it? We'll always have that accuser saying, you're not good enough. But neither will pride in our moral record - because deep down we know there's always more to do. But when you come trusting in Christ's righteousness all those accusing voices are silenced. So you can ask for all the grace and help you need.

But it'll also give you the strength to resist your own temptations and the courage to stand firm against the principalities and powers, instead of being swallowed by the darkness. And you'll choose the good and work for the good, all the time praying, Father, let your kingdom come.