**THE BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL**

***Mark 1:1-13***

***“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God…” (v. 1)***

Thank God for blessing us through Exodus and Deuteronomy studies so far this year. Beginning with this week, we are going to study Mark’s Gospel. Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels, but each passage of this Book is very powerful in its condensed words. The key verse of this gospel can be 10:45, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”* Through his gospel, Mark emphasizes how Jesus is the glorious Messiah by giving up his life for sinners in submission to God’s will, even though he is the Son of God. In light of this, Mark wants to tell all believers what it means to become Jesus’ disciples and what true Christian faith is about in the context of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. May God bless us to learn from our Lord Jesus and follow in his footsteps!

Today we are going to learn about how the gospel of Jesus Christ began. As we begin studying Mark’s Gospel this week, the fall semester will begin on the U of M campus. Many students are busy preparing for the semester. Freshmen especially require preparation—more than their seniors. It seems that not only campus life, but everything in our life needs preparation to begin. The work of the gospel needed it too. Through this passage, we can learn how God prepared the necessary environment for the beginning of his gospel work. May God also help us to prepare spiritually for our fall ministry!

1. **John prepared the way for the Lord (vs. 1-8)**

Look at verse 1. ***“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God…”*** Mark’s gospel commences with the beginning of the good news. We all like good news. Every day we are waiting for some good news. This fall, many Vikings’ fans are eager for their team’s victory at the new stadium. Students may wait for good grades after exams. Children may wait for gifts from their parents. Some may long for job offers. Some married couples may wait for beautiful babies. What else? But in this world, such good news doesn’t grant us lasting joy once we receive it. Rather it can easily be turned into bad news. What then is the truly good news? The Bible says that it is the good news about Jesus! That is, about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God!

Here “Messiah” means the “Anointed One.” In the Old Testament times, God’s servants, like kings, priests, and prophets, were anointed with oil. They worked as mediators between God and his people. God had promised that he would send the perfect Mediator whose origin would be divine as the Son of God. So the Israelites waited and waited for a King like David, who would deliver them from their enemies and reign over them with love, peace, and justice forever. They yearned for a Prophet like Moses, who would tell the truth and reveal God’s mighty power through signs and wonders. They expected that when the Messiah came, he would solve their life problems and set them free from all bondage. God kept his promise and finally sent his Son Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah, who can save each of us from our fundamental life problems that greatly afflict and harass us. He has absolute power to give us a new life and the kingdom of God. In him, we can live truly victorious and fruitful lives. He is the source of all blessings. This is the good news! Wouldn’t you be excited about this good news? May God bless us to meet Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God very personally throughout our Mark’s gospel studies!

How then did the good news begin? Look at verses 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.”’”*** According to God’s promises prophesied by Isaiah, God would send a messenger ahead of the Messiah to prepare the way for him. In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. Spiritually speaking, people’s hearts are like a wilderness, so they must be made ready to welcome the Messiah before his visit. Isaiah 40:4 says, *“Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain.”* Many have dark and damp valley-like hearts with low self-esteem, wounds, sorrow, or lust. Others have hearts like mountains and hills full of pride, greed, or strong ego. Still other’s hearts are rough with fixed ideas, stubbornness, or negative thoughts. Rugged places refer to broken and fragile hearts with anger, hatred, or grudges. These hearts needed to be made level, flat, and straight for our King Jesus’ visit.

In fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah, the messenger came on the stage of history to prepare the way for Jesus. He was none other than John the Baptist. How did he prepare the way for the Messiah? Look at verse 4. ***“And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*** He preached a baptism of repentance. The verb “Baptize” means “to immerse or submerge.” It was a symbolic act of purification. At that time, Jews required the Gentiles who wanted to convert to Judaism to be baptized by self-immersion. Surprisingly, however, John the Baptist asked Jews, God’s covenant people, to be baptized as preparation to welcome the Messiah as if they were Gentiles. This baptism was not just some ritual ceremony, but an expression of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it. In a word, repentance is to turn from sin, going opposite way of the sin. It begins with a deliberate change of mind resulting in a change of one’s behavior and life direction. John proclaimed that repentance would lead the people to the forgiveness of sins.

Sinful human beings naturally don’t like the message of repentance. But what was the response of the people? Look at verse 5. ***“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.”*** Amazingly, many people, including tax collectors and sinners, continually went out to John and listened to his message. According to Luke’s gospel, after listening to his message, many asked him, *“Teacher… what should we do?”* (Lk 3:12).They were baptized, openly acknowledging their sins and making a decision to leave their old ways of life. Outwardly, these people looked unlikely to repent. But in fact, they were willing to solve their sin problem through repentance. This was the preparation to welcome their Messiah. Later when Jesus came, many tax collectors and sinners, who had been baptized by John, welcomed Jesus. They received Jesus’ forgiveness and enjoyed beautiful fellowship with him. They became lively and joyful, eating and drinking with Jesus. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law who did not accept John’s message of repentance, rejected Jesus (Lk 7:29-30). Their unrepentant hearts had no room to welcome Jesus. Consequently, they became like withered branches apart from Jesus, destined to be thrown into fire. We learn that humble repentance is a prerequisite to welcome Jesus in our hearts. Students may know well the importance of prerequisites. Without completing prerequisites, no student can move to the next step of their education. Likewise, without the process of repentance, we cannot enjoy sweet fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. As we begin our Mark’s gospel studies, let’s think about what are the valleys, mountains, and rough and rugged places in each of our hearts that hinder Jesus from entering into our lives. Let’s acknowledge them and humbly repent to welcome our Lord and his reign in our lives.

Before Jesus’ coming, the spiritual atmosphere was like a wilderness. The people were spiritually dead without the word of God for almost four hundred years. How was it possible for John the Baptist to awaken the people of his time to lead such a spiritual revival? Look at verse 6. ***“John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”*** John lived in the wilderness. Originally he was born to prominent, priestly parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth (Lk 1:5). Like other religious leaders at the time, he could’ve enjoyed all the privileges as a priest. But he had a clear identity and sense of mission as the messenger of the Messiah. So he stayed in the wilderness, focusing on deeper fellowship with God through the word of God and prayer. His simple and holy lifestyle protected him from all worldly temptations and blessed him to be filled with the Holy Spirit. His pure life was his power source to serve the people of his time. So God could use him to challenge his culture and awaken dying souls to return to him.

God works to awaken and save men’s souls through preaching (1 Co 1:21b). Therefore, 2 Ti 4:2 says, *“Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.”* I believe that many of us here came to know Jesus through someone who prepared our hearts with the word of God. Likewise, God wants to use us as messengers of Jesus to prepare other people’s hearts. To serve this mission, we need to maintain a Spirit-filled life through living a simple and holy life. But these days, it’s not easy to keep such a lifestyle. Via the internet, through computers or smartphones, wherever we are, worldly temptations and spiritually poisonous information continually threaten our godly life. Consequently, we become easily entangled with sins of the world and lose our spiritual power. But we must know that while pursuing and tasting all these worldly pleasures, we cannot serve God’s mission powerfully. We must go to our own wilderness to meditate on the word of God and pray by setting up a specific time and making a spiritual environment.

Verses 7-8 teach us another important aspect of John’s life impacting his generation as the messenger of Jesus. ***“And this was his 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 main theme of John’s message was about the powerful one to come. As his ministry grew, he became famous and nationally well known. The desire for recognition is a strong human characteristic. Even at this moment, his message was about the Messiah. He knew that he was even unworthy to untie the straps of Jesus’ sandals. At that time, even the lowest Hebrew slave was not required to do this menial task for his master. Before Jesus, however, John humbled himself lower than the least slave. He introduced Jesus as the one who would baptize people with the Holy Spirit. John’s baptism was limited and preparatory to guide people to repent, but Jesus’ baptism would give life and change one’s being fundamentally. Jesus is the only source of the good news, and he himself is the good news for all people. The messenger’s role is only to reveal Jesus and glorify him, so that people may meet Jesus and receive life. May God bless us to learn from John’s lifestyle and humble attitude as the messenger of Jesus!

1. **Jesus prepared himself for the good news (vs. 9-14)**

While John prepared the way for Jesus, Jesus also was preparing for his own mission as the Messiah. How?

First, Jesus submitted himself to the Father’s will. Look at verse 9. ***“At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”*** As we learned, John’s baptism was meant to lead people to repentance and prepare the Messiah’s way. But why did sinless Jesus need to be baptized? It was an act of submission to the Father’s will. Jesus is the Son of God. He is in very nature God, but yet he did not seek equality with God (Php 2:6). According to the Father’s will, he left all his heavenly glory and came to the world to save sinful mankind. He made himself nothing, being made in human likeness.

However, saving sinners from the power of sin and death required more than this self-renunciation. He would die on the cross, taking our sins. According to John’s Gospel, when Jesus came toward him, John the Baptist said, *“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (Jn 1:29)Here the phrase “takes away” reminds us of the ritual on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:5-22). On the Day of Atonement, the high priest took two male goats. One of the two goats was killed, and its blood was sprinkled as a sin offering on the atonement cover in the Most Holy Place. The other goat was chosen as the scapegoat. The priest laid both hands on the head of this live goat and confessed over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—symbolically transferring them to the scapegoat. Then he sent the goat away into the wilderness. God did not remember Israel’s sins taken away by the scapegoat. Jesus would die to take away our sins, bearing them on his own body so our sins may never be remembered by God again (Jer 31:34).

Jesus’ baptism was his self-identification with sinners. It was his determination to take the sin of the world and die on the Cross in our stead. What was the Father’s response toward Jesus’ baptism? Look at verses 10-11. ***“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.’”*** The Father was so pleased with the Son and officially declared that Jesus was the “Anointed One.” The coming of the Holy Spirit on Jesus empowered him to begin his messianic mission (Acts 10:38).

We can see that all three Persons of the Trinity are involved in Jesus’ messianic mission. Through the Father’s will, the Son’s submission, and the Holy Spirit’s power, God’s salvation work began and would be completed. Praise our heavenly Father for his love and mercy on sinners in sending his one and only Son Jesus Christ! Thank you Lord Jesus for your humility and obedience to the Father’s will to death—even death on a cross. Thank you for the Holy Spirit and for giving us new birth and new blessed lives in Christ!

Second, Jesus defeated Satan’s temptation. Look at verses 12-13. ***“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.”*** As Jesus accepted his messianic mission, he had to go through another preparation. Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, and he stayed there forty days. According to Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, Jesus prepared for his confrontation against Satan through forty days of fasting.

Why was it necessary for Jesus to be tempted by Satan before his public ministry? Jesus came to free his people from Satan’s grip. The first Adam failed under Satan’s temptation. Since then, Satan made man his slaves through the power of sin and death. Jesus came as the second Adam to break the strong grip of Satan and recover the lost paradise. The first man Adam failed in a beautiful Garden, but Jesus defeated Satan in the barren wilderness. In fighting against the devil, Jesus did not use his ability as the Son of God, but fought as the perfect human. He depended totally on God through the forty days of fasting prayer. Satan tempted him to yield to the worries of life and to seek an easy way to gain glory and honor avoiding the Cross (Mt 4:1-11). But Jesus defeated the enemy by holding on to the word of God absolutely. Now Jesus was fully ready to set his people free from Satan’s forces.

Jesus’ temptation reveals that our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against Satan and his evil forces in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). Because of the nature of our battle, we cannot win by our human strength. Jesus showed us the secret of victory. Anyone who is called to serve God must overcome Satan’s temptation. Just as Satan tempted Jesus, he tempts us through the worries of life and the desire for worldly honor and glory and an easy way of life without any cross. Satan’s temptation is tenacious. But our Lord has already overcome the world (Jn 16:33b). When we fight the spiritual battle to the end depending on our Lord’s name, holding on to the word of God, and praying continually, God’s mighty hand helps us to win the victory. Furthermore, our Lord Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses and helps us to be winners, since he has been tempted in every way just as we are and has overcome (Heb 4:15). Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! (1 Co 15:57).

Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, is the good news for all of us. The good news began with spiritual preparation. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching the message of repentance. The people prepared for the good news by accepting John’s message and with sincere repentance. Jesus, even he is the Son of God, he himself prepared for his work by obeying the Father’s will and fighting the spiritual battle through fasting prayer. May God help us to prepare our hearts for the good news! May God help us to renew our calling as messengers of Christ and fight the good fight in our spiritual battle!