

# **Mark** **Part 1**

*Mark 1:1-20*

**Who is Mark? (and when and why)**

Mark is an action-packed story for:

- The disciples: confusion → confession  
→ the cross
  
- Jesus: serving → suffering → saving

**What's happening? (take a walk through the text)**

**What's the point? (I'm left with a decision)**

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**West Valley Church**  
**June 14, 2026**  
**Michael O'Neill**

## **The Gospel of Mark**

### **1:1-20<sup>1</sup>**

Welcome to the Gospel of Mark. Our preaching pastors are going to spend the summer taking us through the entire Gospel of Mark.

In the summers here at West Valley Church we go through a book of the Bible together on Sundays, and after much prayer over the winter and spring, we've determined to spend the summer in Mark's gospel. I want to encourage you to take notes or use one of our WVC journals to keep track (you can have one for a \$5 donation). When we're done, you'll have your own Bible study/commentary on the Gospel of Mark!

To help make the most out of our time in this important book of the Bible, we've created a reading plan for us. You can get this from one of our guest services team who will be at the doors handing them out as you leave, or you can get one from the Welcome Center. Here's how this will work: this has a checklist on it, and you will want to read the selected passage sometime *before* Sunday. Make sense?

Now, on some Sundays we will do what I'm going to do today, which is go through the text verse by verse. On other Sundays, we might give an overview of the passage, and on some Sundays, we might just pick out one part of the passage. But if you read it in advance, you will have the context of what we'll be talking about for that day. Okay? Great!

Since you haven't read the passage for today, I want to read it to us. We have a practice of standing to honor God's Word, so would you do that with me? Thank you.

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, 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.'"

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 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."

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<sup>1</sup> Kent Brower, *Mark: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2012)  
David Smith, *Mark: A Commentary for Bible Students* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007)  
John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

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.

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 come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

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 send you out to fish for 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. (Mark 1:1-20, niv)

Thank you for standing; please be seated.

First words are really important. Some of the most famous pieces of literature have memorable first lines. Let me give you a few and see if anyone knows what they are. Anyone here today that was a literature major in college? You finally have a chance to show it was worth it! I'll quote the first line of the book, and you tell me if you know what book it's from.

Ready? We'll start with an easy one:

"In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit..." (Tolkien's *The Hobbit*)

"This is my favorite book in all the world, though I have never read it." (William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*)

"It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen." (George Orwell, 1984)

"You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of The Adventures of Tom Sawyer; but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly." (Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*)

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." (*Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens)

"Call me Ishmael" (*Moby Dick*, Herman Melville)

"He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." (*The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemmingway)

First words of the great works are important and memorable; they set the stage for the

entire book. Last spring we did a series on Jesus' last words, which were very important; well, today we'll see that first words are important, too, and that's no less true for Mark's Gospel; Mark starts fast right out of the gate.

Before we jump into these power-packed twenty verses, let me set the stage for us by first looking at...

### **Who is Mark? (and when and why) did he write this?**

So first of all, almost all scholars agree that this was written by Mark, but who was Mark? This is the Mark that we read about in the New Testament, sometimes called John Mark. We first hear about him the Book of Acts when he was going on missionary journeys with the Apostle Paul and Barnabus. He was Barnabus' cousin. He was not one of the original Apostles, but he was very close to the Apostle Peter – Peter was his spiritual father and mentor. Almost all scholars agree that this is actually Peter's gospel – that Mark wrote down what he heard from Peter. This was written down sometime between the early-forties and early-sixties; in other words, within 10-30 years of Jesus' death and resurrection. This was the first of the four Gospels written. Matthew and Luke borrowed a lot of their gospels from Mark (John's gospel was uniquely his). As the church grew, the Apostles couldn't be in all the house churches everywhere, so they began writing things down that could be copied and circulated among the churches. The Apostle Peter was martyred for following Jesus in the mid-sixties, so Mark's gospel became even more important because it came from Peter.

This has also been called the "action gospel" – it is very fast paced. Mark doesn't take the time to talk about Jesus' birth; he starts right out with John the Baptist and Jesus' inaugural baptism into ministry. Mark uses terms like "suddenly," "immediately," "right away," and others like that.

There's something really important to remember about how Mark organized this gospel. There are 16 chapters in Mark (he didn't put those there; later church leaders added chapters and verses to make it easier to find things). But Mark divided the book into two halves. The first eight chapters show Jesus demonstrating and proving that he is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God. He's trying to show the disciples *who he is*. At the same time we see the disciples just don't get it; they are not figuring it out. Then finally at the end of chapter eight (in the very middle of the book) is what's called "The Great Confession" – Jesus asks them, "Who do you think I am," and finally, Peter says, "You are the Christ," or "You are the Messiah." They finally get it!

The next eight chapters we see Jesus trying to show them *who he is not*. They think the Messiah would be a conquering geopolitical king that would make the Jews have all the power and control over everyone else in the world. But that's not who Jesus is; he is not an earthly king like we think of; he is a serving, suffering, saving king. He came to serve, to suffer, and to give his life for us.

So if you want a summary of the Gospel of Mark, here it is...

## Mark is an action-packed story for:

- **the disciples: confusion → confession → the cross**
- **Jesus: serving → suffering → saving**

I'm going to leave that up there for a minute so you can write it down. This is an action-packed story. For the disciples the action takes them from confusion about who Jesus is, to finally confessing he is the Christ, and then to the cross itself that Jesus died on. For Jesus, it is a fast-paced story of him serving people, then suffering for people, then saving people through his death and resurrection. Got it?

Alright, so now that we know that, let's see...

## What's happening? (we're going to **take a walk through the text**)

...looking at almost each verse of the passage, so if you have your Bible you might want to open it to Mark chapter one because I'm not going to read those verses again. But we are going to look at them in order because they are going to lead us to a very important place today.

Okay? Great. Look at verse one. Notice, like I said, that Mark does not start talking about Jesus' birth, he starts by saying "the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God..." Mark is actually starting further back than Jesus' birth; Mark chose those words carefully because the original language takes us all the way back to the very, very beginning of *everything* – the book of Genesis. The very first line in Genesis describes the beginning of everything God created, and what does that say? "In the beginning God created..." Mark uses the exact same phrase in the original language because he wants to take us back to God's original purpose and plan for people – *in the very first line he is saying that Jesus has come to restore us to what God's relationship with us and purposes for us was supposed to be all along* – before Adam and Eve sinned and blew it all up. The long-standing purposes and promises of God from the very beginning are fulfilled in the life of Jesus. Jesus is a creation reset. That's also why Mark immediately quotes the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Malachi in verses 2 and 3 – Mark is making it clear that Jesus is God, come to us.

Mark doesn't waste any time telling us who Jesus is, and therefore he lets us in on the secret, because for the first eight chapters, we're going to watch the disciples struggle to see what we already know. We're in on it, so that we can watch the disciples try to figure it out. *Mark does this so that we can see ourselves in them.*

As we watch the disciples throughout Mark's gospel, we're going to be tempted to think that they are dense; that they are too blind to see the obvious. But let's be sure to take the plank out of our own eye. How many times has Jesus been at work in your life and you missed it? And listen, if you tell me you've never seen Jesus work in your life, then you are more dense than the disciples. God, in his love, is *constantly* at work in our lives! Remember – this is actually Peter's gospel, so Peter is being honest about how dense *he was!* If Peter can be honest about that, we'd better be, too. Let's make sure we see ourselves in them.

I should point out another thing here: the words “Gospel” or “good news” and “son of god” were actually used in the Roman world, but always to refer to the Emperor, Caesar. Mark is using the same phrases to make it clear that only Jesus is God and that’s the best news ever. So in the first three verses, Mark is telling the Jews that Jesus is God by referencing Genesis and the prophets, and he’s telling the Romans that Jesus alone is God by using those Roman phrases exclusively for Jesus. *Jesus is the answer*; he is God. We will not find our salvation in anything or anyone other than him. Not even the emperor or Rome.

In verses 4-8, There’s something else cool going on here. John the Baptist is literally declaring to the Jews that their exile is over. If you know your Bible history, you know that one of the darkest times in Israel’s story was when they were conquered by Babylon and taken into captivity. This was from about 605 BC to about 535 BC. When they were finally able to begin returning to Jerusalem, their capital city, things were never really the same. Ezra tried to rebuild the Temple, but it was nothing like its former glory when Solomon built it. Nehemiah tried to rebuild the city but failed terribly despite his best efforts. Israel never regained their former glory, and by 60 BC Rome began the conquest of Israel. So by this time in their history that Mark is writing, they are living in Jerusalem, but they are once again in occupied exile.

John the Baptist is literally declaring that, because Jesus is coming, their six and a half centuries of exile is finally over! This was huge news for them! That’s why Jews were coming from all over to be baptized into this new era. They are coming from Jerusalem, where Herod’s rebuilt Temple was, to go out into the wilderness to confess their sins – and at a time that was during the annual Day of Atonement; it all tells us that this new Kingdom is going to be different for the Jews.

It’s also worth noting that Isaiah said that John would be a new Elijah, or the return of Elijah. If you remember Elijah’s story, Mark places John’s appearing exactly where Elijah had disappeared.

So here’s John. Even though he is the first person to appear in Mark’s gospel, he’s not the most important. John’s only words are about Jesus.

Now look at verse 8. There are two important baptisms going here: water, for baptism, and the Spirit descending on Jesus. Water, for repentance. The Spirit, for the presence of God. Water: human. Spirit: God. Water – what we do. The Spirit – what God does. This is exactly what Jesus was talking about in John chapter 3 when he told Nicodemus, “You must be born of both water and the Spirit.” With the Spirit falling on Jesus, the Father declares, “You are my son whom I love...” We are once again left with no doubt about who Jesus is.

Then look at verse 10 – do you see where it says that Heaven was being “torn open and the Spirit descending”? The only other time Mark uses the phrase, “torn open” is when Jesus has died, and the curtain is torn open that separates the Holy of Holies – God’s Presence – from people. One writer says, “Through this gracious gash in the universe, (God) has poured out His Spirit into the earthly realm.”<sup>2</sup> I like that! Both times, God’s presence has invaded ours. This is great news!

In verse 11, you’ll notice that only two people hear God’s voice: Jesus, and the reader. No

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<sup>2</sup> Brower, 59

one else hears it – yet. The next time God’s voice is heard is in Chapter 9 – right after the great confession, and it’s when Peter, James and John hear it. The first eight chapters the disciples don’t understand that Jesus is the Messiah. Then they do, and they hear God’s voice, too.

Remember I said that this is an action Gospel? In verse 12 it says, “At once...” Do you see that? That’s the first of 40 times that Mark uses that phrase in just 16 chapters, and he says similar things many more times than that. “At once...” What? “the Spirit sent (Jesus) out...” Notice that it is the Holy Spirit who is driving the action. It is the Spirit who is the driving force behind everything Jesus does, everywhere Jesus goes, and the truth Jesus declares throughout Mark’s gospel.

The connection between the Spirit leading Jesus into the wilderness is important.

There was a time in our lives that was incredibly difficult. We were living in Nampa, Idaho, and I was the student ministries pastor at College Church on the campus of Northwest Nazarene University. It was a difficult and toxic place to work. We had moved there out of a difficult situation, so we were already hurting. But worst of all, our baby boy, Brenden, who was only two years old, was terribly sick. He was failure to thrive. Nothing he ate was being absorbed by his body. It would either come up or go out pretty much like it went in. This had been going on for a year and would go on for two more years (3 years total). When he was four, he should have weighed around 50 pounds. He weighed about 18 pounds. His body began to shut down and he was dying. Shelly was taking him – and our 4- and 6-year-old boys in tow – to a world renown specialist in Denver, but even he had no idea what it was. During that time my boss wouldn’t allow me to take any time off to be with my family. I had to fight to use my sick time and vacation time and I was told if I asked for any more time I would be let go. And this was a church. I told you it was toxic.

The doctors tested Brenden for celiac, for cystic fibrosis, and something called Shwachman-diamond syndrome. That last one was what all the indicators were – a rare, incurable disorder characterized by bone marrow failure, pancreatic insufficiency, and skeletal abnormalities. All we knew was that at any moment he could die.

All of this was weighing down on me, and I began seeing a psychiatrist. I was borderline clinically depressed. And if you know me at all, you know that’s just not my nature; I tend to be overly optimistic. But it was bad.

At that time a mentor of mine who lived in California happened to be in town, and I was able to spend some time with him. His name was Norm Shoemaker. I told him my struggles, and he said this: “Mike, we tend to think that God’s presence is with us in the good times and absent in the wilderness. But every time there is a wilderness in the Bible, it’s because God is doing a deeper work. God will use our wilderness to draw us closer to him. He is always closer than you think.”

When Jesus was in the wilderness, that’s exactly what was happening with Him. And that is exactly what can happen for you, too, if you are finding yourself in the wilderness right now. Just keep being obedient like Jesus was, and he will bring you out of it stronger and closer to him.

The language Mark uses indicates that going into the wilderness was something Jesus did

not want to do, or at least he had a sense of foreboding about it. But this is very much like Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane; "Father, not my will, but yours be done." Jesus obeyed anyway. If Jesus had not obeyed, he would've forfeited his Messiah-ship. But he obeyed. Scholars suggest that Jesus' time in the wilderness is a reset on the garden of Eden. And the battle of the angels and wild animals is allusion to the cosmic spiritual battle of angels and demons over us. Jesus chose obedience when Adam did not, and therefore he is resetting the creation purpose.

You and I can be obedient in the wildernesses of our lives, and come through with new creation. It took three years for us with Brenden, but when he was four, it all disappeared. He was healed. The specialist said, "Whatever it was, it's gone." Amazingly, it did not affect his development in any way. Today Brenden is a PA in a pain clinic treating struggling patients. Wildernesses are important places.

So now, in verses 14-15, Jesus' identity and his mission has been established. John's work is done and Jesus' work begins. He's been confirmed by the voice from heaven. God's Spirit impels and empowers Jesus in the mission of God, resetting the creation so we can have that original relationship with God.

Then, Jesus crossed the Jordan into Galilee. Remember when the people of Israel finished their wilderness wandering and crossed the Jordan River into what was supposed to be the Promised Land? But they sinned over and over again and never lived up to the promise of God's Kingdom. Here, Jesus is crossing at the same place as Israel did – resetting what the Exodus was supposed to do if his people hadn't sinned. *With Jesus, the Kingdom of God has arrived.*

On our recent trip to Ireland, we were able to visit the round fortress of the O'Neill clan. The fortress was over 1400 years old. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century to the 1600s, the O'Neills were in Ireland – especially northern Ireland – and they ruled it for nearly 5 centuries. While we were there, when local people learned our name, several times they would say, "Welcome to your kingdom." It was a weird feeling to be walking into a kingdom that I have some connection to! "Welcome to your kingdom." I told our staff, every time I come into the office, I wanted them to say that to me.

*When Jesus came to earth, he wasn't arriving into his kingdom. Jesus was bringing the kingdom to us.* And the arrival of the Kingdom of God requires a response from us. Will we participate or not? This is discipleship. This is what Pastor Casey talked about last week. Discipleship is a major theme throughout the entire gospel of Mark. Will we follow Jesus? Immediately, Jesus called his first disciples. These men were fisherman. Jesus called them to fish for men and women. If they followed him, he would make them fish for people. In other words, God's kingdom is about people. About our loving, serving, sharing the good news, and giving people an opportunity to respond.

There is also an important distinction to make here with Jesus calling them. This was not a typical Jewish rabbi and student relationship. Pupils selected the rabbi. Jesus calls his disciples. And this call is a radical call. At once, they left their nets, their livelihood and made their life commitment.

All of this passage has been leading up to this – right from the start. First, Jesus is established as the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. This is a reset of the entire creation

and redemption story with Jesus himself doing what we could not. So he calls his disciples to be a part of this new creation, this new kingdom.

### **What's the point? (The point is that **I'm left with a decision**)**

All of this has led us to this point: to show the radical nature of discipleship. To follow Jesus on his way is to make a complete commitment. The point is not so much that we have to abandon everything (the disciples *did* keep their boats and homes). The point is that *everything* paled into insignificance compared to this call. There is no half commitment here. Clearly the disciples did not understand from the beginning and, they failed in the process, but they were fully committed, and Jesus was committed to them. You and I may fail, but Jesus is committed to us. They left their nets and their families to follow Jesus. Will we be willing to leave it all to follow him? The rest of Mark's gospel shows that this call is not for a limited few; it is for everyone who will answer. Will you? Have you?

Following Jesus means identifying fully with his mission – with God's great purposes for your life and for the world. It is a lifelong commitment to discipleship. Jesus says to you: come, follow me. What is your decision?

*Prayer*

*Benediction:*

Peace to the brothers and sisters, and love with faith from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love. (Ephesians 6:23-24, niv)