

MARK 1

1:1–8

These initial verses can be considered something of a prologue. Mark’s description of John the Baptist’s ministry establishes the expectations that Jesus is to fulfill. Just as John the Baptist was sent to prepare a way for Jesus, this introduction prepares the reader to meet Him.

The quotation in verses 2 and 3 draws upon passages in the Old Testament: “Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared” (Exodus 23:20), “Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple” (Malachi 3:1), and “The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isaiah 40:3). These verses tie together a variety of themes from the Old Testament, such as the Exodus and the coming day of the Lord, and frame the arrival of Jesus in these terms. Mark also presents John the Baptist as similar to Elijah the prophet, whose coarse clothing and lifestyle are echoed in the description of John (see, for example, 1 Kings 1:8).

As is typical of his style, Mark presents a fast-paced, immersive narrative. He does not pause to explain his references and themes to his audience—rather, he expects his reader to notice them and follow along as the story progresses. Mark thus encourages his reader to be careful and perceptive to higher planes of meaning. As is often true when studying the things of God, we must examine and contemplate carefully, for things are not always as they seem (1 Corinthians 2:10–11; 1 Nephi 3:6).

1:9–15

Considering his quick-moving style, it is not surprising that Mark presents Jesus’s actual arrival without much pomp and circumstance. In fact, minimalism is a theme of this entire passage. The baptism itself is

complete by the end of verse 9; Mark seems more concerned with the revelatory experience that follows. God's words, directed toward Jesus in the second-person,¹ echo Psalm 2:7 ("the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee") and Isaiah 42:1 ("Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth"). The former emphasizes Jesus's royal, kingly status; the latter, His humble nature as a servant. The natural paradox presented by these two contradictory ideas serves Mark's purpose in pushing his reader to search for deeper meaning.

After the Spirit descends upon Jesus "like a dove" (Mark 1:10), it immediately drives Him into the wilderness, where He experiences a period of trial and suffering that foreshadows the trial and suffering of performing the Atonement. Jesus emerges from the wilderness preaching the imminent arrival of God's kingdom.

1:16–20

Discipleship is one of the most prominent themes in Mark, so it is appropriate that in this Gospel Jesus's ministry begins with the calling of Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John. Although Jesus performs no miracle and gives no other justification for His solicitation, all four men follow immediately and without hesitation, demonstrating that Jesus's words alone must have carried a great deal of power. Significantly, Jesus chooses four relatively unassuming fishermen to follow Him. Mark is again playing with his audience's expectations. The grand presumptions introduced in the Gospel's opening verses have been followed by a series of relatively mundane occurrences: a man from an insignificant town is baptized, the same man spends time in isolation in the desert, and now, four ordinary men are invited to be His disciples. Mark is encouraging the reader to see the importance in the ordinary, to recognize that God often accomplishes His work through the actions of normal, everyday people.

1:21–28

It is interesting and significant that in the Gospel of Mark—where disciples and opponents of Jesus alike have difficulty fully grasping Jesus's identity and mission—a demon is able to identify Him correctly in the very first chapter. While this teaches a valuable lesson about the limits of human knowledge, it also makes the important point that knowledge alone is not an indicator of discipleship. Note the words of James: "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). Belief in God and even a true understanding of His nature will not suffice unless accompanied by the character and actions of a true disciple. The immediate acquiescence of the demon to Jesus's command, "Hold thy peace and come out of him" (Mark 1:25), demonstrates the authority of Jesus. Those present for the miracle recognize this immediately.

1:29–34

Women play a prominent role in Mark's Gospel, and the Evangelist sets this theme early by including the story of Jesus healing Simon's mother-in-law. Her experience offers a pattern of discipleship: immediately after her life is touched and blessed by Jesus, she turns outward and begins to serve others.

It's likely that this episode, following the healing of the man possessed by a demon (Mark 1:21–28), also takes place on the Sabbath, which would explain why the sick and afflicted are brought to Jesus at sundown. Jewish days end at sunset, not midnight. The issue of healing on the Sabbath will cause controversy later in Mark, but it is passed by without mention here.

1:35–39

The disciples' first recorded act in the Gospel since the moment of their call—informing Jesus of the incredibly obvious fact that He is in high demand—is almost humorous. They are clearly trying to help but are oblivious to what Jesus actually needs. This is the first element in a theme that Mark will develop thoroughly in his narrative: the well-intentioned Twelve are continually trying their best, but they do not yet fully grasp who Jesus is and what He is required to do. Quite often, they do the wrong thing for the right reason. Fortunately, Jesus demonstrates great patience toward them. One might be tempted to criticize the disciples' incompetence and lack of understanding, but we would do well to remember that modern readers have the benefit of two millennia's worth of hindsight into Christ's character and still make many of the mistakes the early disciples did.

1:40–45

In this section and the previous one, we begin to see another important Markan theme. The miracles that Jesus perform demonstrate His divine nature while also attracting excessive and sometimes unwanted attention. This will not be the last time that Jesus will request that a miracle or bit of divine truth be withheld, at least temporarily, from public knowledge. It is not always clear why this is the case, although it is possible that large crowds could interfere with Jesus's freedom of movement (see Mark 1:45, where His burgeoning popularity prevents Him from publicly entering the city) or that Jesus is concerned about the masses following Him for the wrong reasons (see this concern expressed in John 6:26, where Jesus observes that the crowds are following Him out of a hope of having their temporal needs met rather than out of a desire for spiritual nourishment).

Notes

- 1 Compare Luke 3:22; contrast Matthew 3:17's third-person declaration.

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