

Mark 1:1-11 “Four Witnesses for Jesus”

Intro. As you probably know, Mark wrote his gospel for the Romans, and his theme is Jesus Christ the Servant. In the case of a servant, you are more interested in what a servant can do, not so much in what he says. So the emphasis in this Gospel is on activity. One reason Mark is the shortest of the gospel accounts is due to the fact that it contains less of the teaching of Jesus. Since Mark's gospel focuses more on the activity of Jesus, one of his favorite words is “straightway” (KJV) or “immediately.”¹ He uses that word forty-one times. Mark is like a motion picture of the life of Jesus.

Notice how Mark begins his gospel rather abruptly, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark begins with a grand announcement that he has good news to share, and it is good news about Jesus, who he claims is the Messiah, the Son of God. I don't know about you, but I've heard enough bad news, especially since the pandemic began. I would like to hear some good news! Well, we are going to read and hear the good news as proclaimed by Mark, one of the Gospel writers.

And in this opening section Mark records the testimonies of several dependable witnesses to back up his opening assertion about Jesus. Do you believe that Jesus is the God-anointed Savior, the Son of God? If you do not yet believe, I want to present Mark's convincing evidence. If you do believe, I want to convince you even more with the hope that you will share this good news with others. A strong faith in Jesus is needed even more as our society becomes more openly antagonistic toward the Christian faith. First of all, we see from our text:

I. THE WITNESS OF MARK HIMSELF

Mark does not identify himself as the author of this gospel, but it is clear from historical evidence that he is the author. It is likely that Mark was an eyewitness of some of the events that he wrote about, probably when he was an older teenager. He lived in Jerusalem with his mother, Mary. Their home later became a meeting place for believers in the city (Acts 12:1-19).² Since the apostle Peter called Mark “my son” (1 Peter 5:13), it is probable that Peter led Mark to faith in Jesus Christ. Church tradition states that the Gospel of Mark reflects the sermons of Simon Peter. If that's the case, then this gospel also contains the eyewitness account of Peter.

So what was the witness of Mark?

A. That Jesus Is the Messiah – Long ago God promised to deal with the sin problem of man by sending the Messiah. Note the exalted title given to the Savior here in v.1. Jesus is called “Christ,” which means the anointed one, hence, ordained, set apart (or commissioned) and enabled by God to carry out His mission. He was ordained and anointed as Prophet, Priest, and King, in order to carry out the task of saving His people to the glory of God. So Mark claims that He is the Messiah, the Savior, that God promised long ago. We're going to see what Jesus did to save us from our sins a little later.

¹ First used in v.10 and several other times in the first chapter.

² Several scholars believe that Mark was the young man described in Mark 14:51-52.

Furthermore, Mark states boldly in the opening verse of his gospel:

B. That Jesus Is the Son of God³ – Thus, what dignity he ascribes to Jesus! The assertion that Jesus is the Son of God is in harmony with the fact that throughout his book, Mark constantly ascribes divine qualities and activities to Jesus. He is the One who calms the storm, heals the sick, and causes the lame to walk. He even has the authority to forgive sin (2:5-10). Surely, He is the Son of God!

Let believers cling to this doctrine. With it, we stand on a rock. Without it, we have nothing solid beneath their feet. Our hearts are weak. Our sins are many. We need a Redeemer who is *able* to save completely, and set us free from the wrath to come. Only the Son of God can do that. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, He shall be called the “Mighty God” (Isaiah 9:6).

So Mark is writing his gospel to show that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. Yet he also makes reference to:

II. THE WITNESS OF THE PROPHETS

There was nothing unforeseen and suddenly contrived in the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. From Genesis to Malachi we have hundreds of prophecies relating to the coming of the Messiah. So we should not be surprised that Mark quickly makes reference to the prophecies of Scripture. He says in v.2, “As it is written⁴ in the Prophets....” Then in v.2 he quotes Malachi 3:1, and in v.3 he quotes from Isaiah 40:3.

In these two prophecies we see:

A. The Sign of Messiah’s Coming – Today we are looking for signs of the Second Coming of Christ, and there are many signs indicating that His return could be soon. But prior to the first coming of Jesus, the Jews were looking for signs of the coming of Messiah (8:11-12). One of those signs is given by both Malachi and Isaiah. Both indicated that God would send a messenger to prepare for Messiah’s coming. In v.2 we read, “Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.” Mark pictures Christ as an energetic, swiftly moving, mighty King. In ancient times, before a king visited any part of his realm, a messenger was sent before him to prepare the way. It is not surprising, therefore, that Mark’s Gospel starts out by picturing the herald, so that from the very outset the student of this writing may be impressed with the exalted character of the One who is being heralded or proclaimed.

So we see that already, Mark is proving his assertion that Jesus is the Messianic King. Were these prophecies fulfilled? Indeed, for let us consider:

B. The Fulfillment of this Sign - We can know the identity of this messenger from several of the details about him:

1. He Will Cry Out in the Wilderness – In v.3 Mark says, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness....” That is not exactly the place where one would draw a crowd. It was contrary to expectation. The normal place for a prophet to preach to a large crowd would have been the temple courts in Jerusalem.

I preached my first sermon shortly after my 18th birthday. I was a good bit nervous as I prepared my sermon. So I went about a quarter mile into the woods next to my neighborhood, built

³ This phrase is also found in 3:11 & 15:39 of his gospel.

⁴ This verb is in the perfect tense, indicating that Scripture has lasting impact.

a pulpit out of scrap wood, and began to practice my sermon out in the wilderness of those woods! I assumed I would always be alone until one day I noticed some kid approaching me, moving ever closer behind the trees to observe this strange sight! I was no John the Baptist because that was the only person who came out to hear me! [Illus.#C-3271]. However, John probably started out preaching to small crowds in the wilderness, and the crowds grew and grew as people told others about this prophet, especially in light of those two prophecies that people were familiar with.

2. He Will Preach Repentance – The prophecy indicates that in the last of v.3, where we see that the prophet would preach, “Prepare the way of the LORD; Make His paths straight.” His task was to prepare the hearts of the people for the reception of their Messiah. This implies that they must make straight His paths, meaning that they must provide the Lord with a ready access into their hearts and lives. They must make straight whatever was crooked, not in line with God’s holy will. We are living in a day when so many are living crooked and perverted lives and people need to get right with God! Otherwise, as long as you hold on to sin, you are maintaining a separation between you and God.

By the way, if you look carefully, we see in the prophecy of v.3 that an affirmation of the deity of Jesus is given. It says, “Prepare the way of the LORD...” The word “LORD” in all caps is the translation of the name of God, YHWH! So even prophecy indicated that the Messiah would be the Son of God.

So the prophets said that someone would come just before the appearance of the Messiah, who would preach in the wilderness a message of repentance. Has that prophecy been fulfilled? Indeed it has. This prophecy of the Old Testament was fulfilled in our third witness. Beginning in v.4 we read about:

III. THE WITNESS OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Mark identifies John the Baptist as the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah’s herald.⁵ Is there any evidence that John the Baptist was indeed the forerunner of the Messiah? Yes indeed, for:

A. He Fulfilled the Prophecy of the Messenger - He did so in at least five ways:

1. He Appeared in the Wilderness – Mark says in v.4, “John came baptizing in the wilderness...” He fit one aspect of the prophecy by ministering in the wilderness, no doubt the Judean wilderness, including the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea. One might expect that John would have gone to the population centers, to the cities, to preach. Instead, he preached in the wilderness, in fulfillment of this prophecy. He must have been some preacher to get people to walk or ride for miles and miles through a wilderness to hear him preach. Most preachers can’t get more than 100 people to ride in an air conditioned car, and sit on padded pews in air conditioned comfort to hear them preach! They would stand in the heat, probably for an hour or more to hear John preach.

2. He Preached a Baptism of Repentance – I have already mentioned that the prophet would get the people spiritually prepared for the Messiah through repentance. So in the last of v.4 we see that he was “preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” By God’s

⁵ Likewise, as we see from John’s gospel (John 1:23), John the Baptist acknowledged that he was the forerunner of the Messiah, by saying, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the LORD’”. So does Jesus Himself in Matt. 11:10.

grace and power they needed a complete change of mind and heart leading to a complete turnabout of life.

By the way, the truest way to create in men a longing for Jesus is to evoke the penitent consciousness of sin. When men are roused to believe in the reality of the judgment of God, and to realize their own evil, they are ready to listen to the blessed news of a Savior from sin. The Christ whom John heralds is the Christ that men need.

Now what was new and startling was not that he baptized, for the people were already acquainted with the baptism of Gentile proselytes,⁶ but rather that this baptism of repentance was required *even* of the children of Abraham (cf. Mt. 3:9). Yes, *they* needed to repent as well. The stepping down into the Jordan and later stepping up out of it reminded them that the old sinful self must be buried and left behind so that those baptized may rise to newness of life. Notice also in the last of v.5 that baptism was associated with confessing their sins. We must acknowledge our sins and agree with God that what we have done is wrong.

Many people are going the wrong way in life. They are going down the path of sin. They need to repent, and change direction. Have you truly repented of your sins. Have you confessed your sins to God, and even to those you have wrong? If not, why not do so today and receive both cleansing and forgiveness. That leads to another characteristic of John:

3. He Preached the Hope of Forgiveness - John proclaimed that such repentance could lead to the forgiveness of sin that the Messiah would bring. John preached repentance and baptized *unto* (Gk. *eis*) remission for sins (not *for* remission of sins). The word “forgiveness” means sending away. It is a very comforting expression, reminding one of such passages as Lev.16, where Israel was instructed to take two goats, one was slain for the sins of the people, and on the head of the other, they were to confess their sins, and send it away into the wilderness. Perhaps from time to time a goat would appear out there in the wilderness as John preached. This also reminds us of Ps. 103:12, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” That removal of sin necessitated the shedding of the blood of the Lamb, as was taught by John the Baptist himself in John 1:29.

Another reason why we believe John fulfilled the prophecy is because:

4. He Was Successful - In v.5 we read, “Then all the land of Judea, and those from Jerusalem, went out to him and were all baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.” It is clear that John’s preaching arrested the attention of the whole Jewish people and created an excitement all over Palestine, especially Jerusalem and Judea. John was the first true prophet of God to rise up in over 300 years and they were also looking and longing for the Messiah. As a result, multitudes went out to see and hear John, even though he was preaching in a wilderness! There must have been thousands upon thousands of people, one crowd replacing another, and then still another, and another, etc. They sensed that John could well be the forerunner of the Messiah.

By the way, this just goes to prove that you don’t have to have a good location to have a growing church. What is most important is that *God* is at work! If you have someone preaching the Word of God like John the Baptist did, anointed by the Holy Spirit, you will have people come from miles around to hear such preaching!

5. He Fit the Image of a Prophet – In v.6 we read, “Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist...” In his dress, manner of life, and message of repentance, John identified with Elijah. After all, God promised in Mal. 4:5 that he would send Elijah. John dressed in a similar fashion to Elijah (2 Kings 1:8 ESV), and such rugged apparel

⁶ Furthermore, the Jews practiced many ritualistic washings (Lev. 11-15).

became symbolic of the Prophetic office (Zech 13:4; cf. 1 Sam. 28:14). Jesus makes special mention of the fact that John did not wear fine clothes (Matt. 11:8).

John's food was as simple as was his clothing. Since he preached in a wilderness, there wasn't an abundance of food, so he lived off the land. So what did he have to eat? The last of v.6 says "he ate locusts and wild honey." How would you like to eat locusts for lunch today? Yet it was not as bad as it seems. He probably pulled off their heads, legs, and wings, and roasted or baked their bodies to make them crunchy and added a little salt. After all, it is clear from Lev.11:22 that the Lord permitted or even encouraged the Israelites to eat four kinds of insects. Even today certain Arabian tribes relish them. And due to "climate change," they are seriously trying to get people to eat insects instead of beef and pork! I'm sure the locusts tasted better with another staple of his diet: honey.⁷ The main point is that by means of his simple mode of life, evident with respect to both food and clothing, he was a living protest against all selfishness and self-indulgence that was so common, even among some of the Jews.

To me, the evidence is overwhelming that John the Baptist was indeed the forerunner of the Messiah. Why would he do what he did, and live as he did, and preach as he did unless *God* gave him such a special mission? That means 2 things: First, since he was a prophet of God, we should listen to him. Secondly, that means that the Messiah came within his lifetime, or certainly shortly after he preached and baptized. That in turn gives strong evidence that Jesus of Nazareth *is* the Messiah that God promised to send! No one else in the time period of John the Baptist fit the description of the Messiah.

B. His Witness Concerning Jesus – What did this great prophet that God raised up say about Jesus?

1. He Is Far Greater Than Himself – As we see from v.7, John preached, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose." John was a great preacher, drawing large crowds. He baptized thousands of people. He feared no one in his preaching. He was indeed strong. Yet John says that the One coming after him was far greater! Thus, he wanted to divert attention away from himself to Jesus, as any true preacher of God will do (2 Cor. 4:5).

In order to emphasize this contrast between himself and his Superior, John uses an illustration borrowed from the custom prevailing at the time, namely, that when, weary of travel and with dusty sandals, a master would return home, his menial servant or slave would try in every way to make him comfortable. The first thing he would do is untie or unlace the master's dusty sandals and remove them. He typically would also wash the master's feet. Thus, he made it clear that he was not the Messiah but only came to prepare the people for His coming (Luke 3:15; cf. John 1:19-25; 3:25-36).

Just as John understood his place in reference to Jesus, even so we should humbly serve Jesus, and obey His every command.

2. He Has a Greater Baptism – In v.8 he preached, "I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." John was able to perform only the outward rite of baptism with water. But Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus fulfilled this prophecy when He sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, shortly after His ascension to heaven. As we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and filled by the Holy Spirit, we are filled with a new power for living right. We have a new power to serve the Lord.

⁷ It is, however, not necessary to conclude that v.6 gives us a complete summary of the Baptist's diet.

Is there any evidence in your life that you have had this baptism of the Spirit? All true believers in Jesus are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9) and should be filled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Such a filling of the Spirit will enable you to resist temptation, live a godly life, and serve God effectively.

Finally, we know that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God because of:

IV. THE WITNESS OF THE GODHEAD

The Trinity is gloriously revealed here. We see God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit in the baptism of Jesus. Notice the testimony of each person of the Godhead:

A. Jesus' Witness Concerning His Saving Work – In v.9 we read, “It came to pass in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” The question may be asked, “Since Jesus was sinless, and did not need to repent and remove sin, why then did He submit to baptism?” Perhaps the main reason was this: In baptism we identify with Jesus. We acknowledge that we are followers of Jesus. Even so in baptism, Jesus identified with *us* in every way, even to the point of taking upon Himself our sin. He was willing to fulfill the prophecy of Isa. 53:6, “All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” John the Baptist knew that was the mission of Jesus. He said of Jesus in John 1:29, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” It would appear, therefore, that the demand of Jesus to be baptized by John signified His solemn resolution to take upon Himself the guilt and punishment of those for whom He was going to die. It also served as His acceptance of His ministry as a preacher, teacher and disciple maker.

B. The Holy Spirit's Witness – In v.10 we read, “And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove.” As John raised Him up out of the water, Jesus saw heavens suddenly split open, and from that opening Jesus saw the Spirit descend upon Him. Thus, the Holy Spirit was bearing witness that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior God promised to send.

Notice also that the Spirit descended upon Him “like a dove.” Why was this third person of the Trinity represented by a dove? Probably to indicate the purity, gentleness, peacefulness, and graciousness which characteristically mark the Holy Spirit.

The symbol of the dove may also be regarded as a prophecy of the gentleness of the Son. The Jews were looking for a warrior king, but the Holy Spirit was showing that Jesus came to conquer by meekness, and reign by the omnipotence of love. He came the first time to be a gentle, loving Savior. While that Spirit's descent was partly for Jesus' sake, it was for others too; for John himself tells us in John 1 that this sign had been told him beforehand, and that it was his sight of the descending dove which heightened his thoughts and gave a new turn to his testimony, leading him to know and to show “that this is the Son of God.”

Besides adding a witness to Jesus, the anointing of the Spirit had another purpose. The divine Son at His Incarnation adopted human nature, which is in need of, and capable of being strengthened. Thus, He was enabled to function as such a great preacher, teacher, and even found strength to endure the suffering of the cross!

Since Jesus identified with our humanity and needed strengthening, how much more do we need the Holy Spirit! You can't live the Christian life without the power of the Holy Spirit.

C. The Father's Witness – In v.11 we read, “Then a voice came from heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”⁸ First of all, the Heavenly Father affirmed the unique deity of Jesus. He said, “You are My . . . Son,” and the word “You” is emphatic. He also bore witness of how He loved His Son and was pleased with His Son. In the quiet recess of eternity, the Son was the object of the Father's inexhaustible delight. The Son's reaffirmation of His purpose to shed His blood for a lost world brought forth His Father's affirmation of delight in the Son's obedience. These words proclaimed the Father's full and complete approval of Christ's mission to seek and save the lost. No doubt the Father's voice heightened our Lord's own consciousness of His divinity and His mission.

How filled with comfort is this paragraph, for it not only indicates that the Son loves His followers enough to suffer the pangs of hell in their stead, but that also the Spirit fully cooperates by strengthening Him for this very task, and that the Father is so very pleased with Him that He must rend asunder the very heavens, so that His voice of delightful approval may be heard on earth. All three are equally interested in our salvation, and the three are One.

Conclusion: So as Mark opens his gospel, we see 4 witnesses to the fact that Jesus is the Savior that God sent. We have Mark's testimony. We have the testimony of Scripture. We have the testimony of John the Baptist. And we have the 3-fold testimony of the Godhead. God said long ago that at the testimony of 2 or 3 witnesses everything shall be established. Well, we have *four* witnesses confirming that Jesus is the Son of God, and Savior of mankind.

What do you think of Jesus? What is your verdict? Do you believe that He is the Savior who died for our sins? Do you believe that He is the Son of God? If so, have you repented of your sin and placed your faith in Jesus as Savior? Is there any evidence that you have received the Holy Spirit? If not, I call upon you to repent, and believe in Jesus today. Then you need to follow the Lord in baptism. He was baptized for you, not only in water, but in death itself. Surely you should be willing to follow Him in baptism.

Those of us who are Christians need to follow Mark's example and share the good news about Jesus with others. Will you do that?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956); William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Mark* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975); H.A. Ironside, *Expository Notes on the Gospel of Mark* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1948); Alexander Maclaren (not including sermon on 1:1), *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 4 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); J.C. Ryle (1816-1900), *Mark: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1993); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Diligent: Mark* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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⁸ The Father's announcement from heaven reminds us of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1.