

Mark 1:1

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 September 2015

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] We got some good news on Friday. Joseph, our youngest son, has been selected or given the opportunity to be a flag-baiter at the Scotland-Poland football match a week Thursday. If you've ever watched these big international games, you maybe can picture the scene, how the flag is carried in before the teams. It's a big flag, and I think at each corner there's a child or teenager carrying the flag. So for reasons I won't bore you with, it turns out that Joseph is going to have that opportunity a week Thursday, so it's all very exciting. You can imagine the excitement. It all happened very, very quickly. At the beginning of the day, we knew nothing about it, and by lunchtime, it was all a done deal. And the thing about good news, and this isn't something that will surprise you. You know that this is true. The thing about good news is that you want to tell others. You want other people to hear about it, and we take enjoyment in sharing good news that we have heard and sharing it with others. We can't keep it to ourselves. Well, today we're going to start a series of sermons. It will be all about good news. We're going to begin working our way through the gospel of Mark, and my hope and prayer is that we will all be gripped and excited by the good news that we will discover, and that we will all want to share the good news with others. Those who know nothing of this good news have never heard this good news have never heard this good news. We're going to start this morning with just one verse. The very first verse of the gospel seems a reasonable place to start.

Mark chapter 1 and verse 1, we read, These are the words that we want to think about this morning. But before we launch into an exploration of these choice words, let's just step back for a moment and fleetingly and really rather superficially introduce the book we're going to be coming, I trust, very familiar with. Mark's gospel was written by Mark as a revolutionary revelation by John Mark to give him a fuller title. John Mark is a character we are introduced to in the Bible. He was the son of a woman named Mary in whose house the early church gathered in Jerusalem. You may remember the occasion when Peter was released miraculously from prison in Jerusalem, and having found himself free from captivity, we read in Acts chapter 12 and verse 12,

He went to the house of Mary, the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. And everything would point in the direction of this individual as the author of this gospel.

We then read of how John Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on a missionary journey, but proved to be the cause of a fallout between them. I'm not saying that it was his fault, but nonetheless he was the cause of a fallout between these two older and more mature men.

In time, it becomes clear that John Mark was reconciled again to Paul. If indeed we could say he was ever at enmity with him, he wasn't. It was one of these things that led to this fallout. And then the last time we meet John Mark in the Bible is in Peter's first letter, where he is spoken of by Peter as my son Mark.

[4 : 24] In very tender and paternal language, even though Peter, of course, wasn't the actual father of Mark, but spiritually he considered himself as such and describes him in that way, my son Mark. And that last reference is particularly relevant to our current enterprise, as it is generally agreed that John Mark had Peter as his principal source for his gospel that he penned and that we are going to be thinking about in the next several months, I would imagine.

It's possible that Peter himself or others commissioned or encouraged Mark to take on the task of recording Peter's eyewitness testimony concerning Jesus.

John Mark himself was not an eyewitness, but he had Peter, who was so intimately connected with Jesus as the one that he could hear from and so record this gospel for us.

There isn't a clear view as to when John Mark penned this gospel. The opinion seems to fall between the mid-50s to the mid-60s A.D., somewhere within that decade.

But there does seem to be a fair degree of unanimity that it was written in Rome and written particularly for Gentile or non-Jewish believers. In the first instance, perhaps, the believers in Rome itself, though, of course, it was helpful and relevant for others, indeed, for us 2,000 years later.

[6 : 07] Now, the likely date and location of composition, they're not just dry facts to give you some background, but they shed dramatic light on the gospel itself and the circumstances of its composition and, indeed, the circumstances of the gospel's original audience.

I'm sure you've heard the phrase, fiddling while Rome burns. Of course, that phrase that we use even in language today refers to the Roman emperor Nero, who reputedly fiddled during a great fire that destroyed Rome in 64 A.D.

Notice the correspondence with the likely date of composition of this gospel in Rome. Nero came to power some 10 years before, but towards the end of the 50s, the decade of the 50s, he seems to lose the place big time and is increasingly marked by maniacal cruelty and despotic barbarism.

Historians who have no particular sympathy for the gospel would concur in describing Nero in that way. And so when the fire destroys most of Rome and many point the finger at Nero as the likely cause of the fire, what Nero does is point the finger at the Christians and lays the blame at their feet, and they're followed.

A great and severe persecution when many believers were horribly tortured and killed. And it would have been, in all probability, in these very circumstances that I've just described, that the words of our text would have been first written, would have been first read, would have been first explained and considered by believers in Rome.

[8 : 14] The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and how God's people needed good news. They needed gospel.

They needed good news. And good news is what they got. Now our circumstances, thank God, are less dramatic, but the news is just as good.

Now as we turn to the text in particular, I think we could say that Mark would have made a lousy poker player because in his very first sentence, he pretty much lays all his cards on the table.

It's as if he is addressing his readers and he says to them, you want to know what my book is all about? This book that you've begun to read, you want to know what it's about? Well, I'll tell you what it's about.

It's all about this man, Jesus. The good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And I want this morning to focus on some key words and titles in this first sentence.

[9 : 19] We won't explain them, especially the titles given to Jesus. We won't explain them exhaustively, not that we could, but we won't even attempt to explain them exhaustively because that will happen week by week as we go through this account.

Mark will present us in ever greater detail. We'll present us to Jesus as the Christ, as the Son of God.

So the words that we want to think about this morning in particular are first of all, the word beginning, the beginning of the gospel. The second word is the word gospel.

And then we do want to say something about Jesus and the titles that he has given, the Christ, the Son of God. So let's start with that first word, beginning.

And this word we could describe as both descriptive, but also as significant. What do I mean by distinguishing between these two characteristics of the word?

[10 : 24] What do I mean by calling this word descriptive? Well, it's descriptive for the simple reason that the word identifies or describes what Mark presents as the beginning of the story.

namely, the prophetic announcement and its fulfillment in the coming of John the Baptist that is spoken of in the verses that follow. In verse 1, the beginning of the gospel.

And then in verse 2, it is written in Isaiah the prophet. I think it's reasonable to connect these two things. Mark is saying, this is the beginning. This is where the story begins. Or in any case, this is where I'm going to pick up the story with this particular beginning, this prophecy recorded in Isaiah that finds fulfillment in the coming of John the Baptist.

So in that sense, the word simply describes what Mark is doing, where Mark is beginning his account. It can be argued, and it is cogently argued, that perhaps Mark conceives the beginning as extending beyond the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy with the word perhaps encompassing the whole gospel as, in a sense, the beginning.

And if we take it in those terms, it's quite suggestive in that it suggests to us that though Mark has recorded for us all these events of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, there is more to come concerning this man, Jesus.

[11 : 59] But the word is not only descriptive in that sense, in terms of establishing the start of the timeline of the story. It's also a word that is loaded with significance.

The word beginning, that very word beginning, has biblical overtones that lend to this sentence, an awesome ring at the very opening of Mark's account.

What are these biblical overtones? Well, the word echoes the manner in which Mark begins his gospel, echoes the words that we find at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis in chapter 1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And it's the same word that Mark used. Of course, in Genesis, it's a Hebrew word. In Mark, it's a Greek word. But it's the same word. In fact, in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, commonly described as the Septuagint, it is this word that Mark uses, arche, in translating Genesis 1.1.

So the very same word is found. And I think this is significant. This isn't just some coincidence. And I think it's significant for two reasons. Mark, in grounding his gospel, is grounding his gospel in God and in God's authority and in God's initiative.

[13 : 33] It is God who initiates new beginnings. Just as it was God who created the heavens and the earth, this grand cosmic new beginning, so in what Mark is going to tell us about, he wants to make it very clear that God is at work, that God is the initiator of this good news that he is going to share with us.

But the word also speaks of God initiating in the person of Jesus a new beginning of cosmic proportions.

For Mark, the coming of Jesus is no less momentous than the creation of the universe. For in Jesus, a new creation is at hand, is dawning.

But as we speak of a new beginning of cosmic significance, I wouldn't want you to remain, I wouldn't want any of us to remain as simply awestruck observers, though I do want you to be awestruck by it.

I also want to tell you this morning that God remains a God and is today a God who specializes in new beginnings.

[14 : 51] He can initiate something new in your life. And He can do so because of the new beginning that He has begun in the person of His Son at Jesus.

Our God is a God of new beginnings. So there's great significance even in this first word that we find in the gospel, the beginning of the gospel.

But then it takes us to the second word that we want to make reference to, gospel. And with this second word, we want to think about its meaning, but also its number.

And I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. What about the meaning of this word? Now the meaning of the word is straightforward. And I'm sure many of you will have heard on multiple occasions what this word means.

The Greek word evangelion. What does it mean? Well it means good news. It's a composite word that draws together these two Greek words good and news.

[15 : 57] Good, tidy. And that is straightforward enough. The beginning of the gospel, the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ. But what adds additional, we might say, flavor and insight into what Mark is doing or how Mark is using the word is to appreciate how this word was used and understood in the Roman world that Mark is part of and is addressing with this gospel, but also how this word can be traced to the message of the Old Testament.

So we will have a greater grasp of the significance, the meaning of the word, when we have an appreciation of these two aspects, how the word was used in the Roman world, but also how it ties in with the message of the Old Testament.

Among the Romans, the word evangelium was often used of good news associated with or connected to the emperor.

We know what a prominent place the emperor held in the Roman Empire. He was the heart of the empire. Everything revolved around the emperor, and this word was often used in connection with significant events concerning the emperor.

Let me just give you one example that concerns Caesar Augustus. Now, Caesar Augustus was the first Roman emperor. He was the one who reigned when Jesus was born.

[17 : 34] He's mentioned by name in the birth narrative in Matthew's gospel. Now, in a report by a Roman historian of Caesar Augustus' life and reign, a report that dates to the year nine before Christ, the birth of Caesar Augustus is described as evangelion or good news, the very word that Mark employs here at the beginning of his gospel.

For a Roman audience, and remember, Mark is in Rome and he's writing in the first instance to believers in Rome. For a Roman audience, an evangelion, a gospel, or good news was an event of historic proportions that inaugurate something new, some new state of affairs in the world.

This is how good news would have been understood. It's the way the word was employed by the Romans. Can you see what we might call the rich gospel irony?

While the world was celebrating the birth and reign of Caesar Augustus and subsequent emperors like Nero, under whom the believers were suffering so terribly.

And as those in the empire celebrated news concerning these men as good news, Mark directs their attention and he directs our attention to another, to a much less likely originator of good news, he directs our attention to Jesus, the one born in a stable in Bethlehem.

[19 : 17] His coming is good news on a different scale altogether. His coming, like no other, inaugurates a new era for the world and all mankind.

Good news. But the word gospel or good news also points back and ties in with the messianic promise of the Old Testament.

Let's just remind ourselves of what we read in Isaiah's prophecy in chapter 52 from verse 7. How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, your God reigns.

Listen, your watchmen lift up their voices. Together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people. He has redeemed Jerusalem. Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

[20 : 34] See, these words, these words of God written through the prophet Isaiah, these words find fulfillment in the coming of Jesus, the good news.

He is the good news the prophet is speaking on. So the meaning of the word is helpful and enriches our understanding of how Mark is beginning his account.

But also I mentioned its number. And here we're talking grammar, but we'll do so very fleetingly. The number of a noun refers to whether it's singular or plural.

We know that. Now in the Roman world, this word, evangelion, translated gospel or good news always appears in the plural.

Any piece of good news is understood to be one piece of good news among many. There's lots of good news. It's not just one piece of good news.

[21 : 35] There's the birth of Caesar Augustus. There's when he takes power as the emperor, when he has some great victory. All of these are pieces of good news, lots of good news.

Lots of bad news as well, but lots of good news. And the word is always in the plural because it's understood. Well, there's not just one piece of good news. But the quite striking manner in which this word is used in the New Testament on every occasion, including this occasion, is that it is in the singular.

And what I think Mark is doing by using this word in the singular, using it in a way that it wouldn't have been used, he's saying this good news is altogether different. This is the good news.

It's not just one piece of good news and you can choose between any. You say, well, I like this one and I like this one and well, I'm not so keen on that one. No, this is the good news. It's the good news.

I mentioned when we began the good news that we received in the house on Friday. It's not news of great significance, perhaps of greater significance.

[22 : 45] I bring to mind just having a conversation a few days ago with parents who were sharing with me how an operation that their son had to have had gone very well.

And they shared that as great news and of course it was great news. It was good news, much more important than the news that we were hearing about in our home just the day before yesterday.

But even that good news is just one piece of good news among so many pieces of good news. But what Mark says is that what he is going to be writing about, what he is going to be presenting to his readers is the good news, the greatest news, the news that can be spoken of as all that epitomizes and draws together good news, the good news.

And before I move on, I would ask you a question. Is this your good news? Can you say, when we speak of the gospel concerning Jesus Christ, the Son of God, are you able to say, this is my good news?

This is my good news. This is good news for me above all other good news of promotions and of children being born and of so many things that gladden our hearts and rightly so.

[24 : 09] Can you say, this is my good news? Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So we have the word beginning. We have the word gospel.

But then, of course, we have the one who is being introduced to us, the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In the little outline that you may have just noticed, we talk about one name and two titles.

We're not going to say a great deal about the name and the two titles for the simple reason that this will be the subject, in a very real sense, of every sermon that we preach on this gospel.

And Mark himself will develop for us the significance of the name and of the title that he introduces here at the beginning of his gospel.

But something needs to be said. The beginning of the gospel about Jesus. Jesus. Jesus is the personal or given name of the one Mark is introducing us to.

[25 : 13] He's called Jesus just like I'm called David. It's his name, his personal name. But his name is significant. The name is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Jehoshua or Yeshua, Joshua.

And it has a meaning. It means the Lord saves or the Lord is salvation. And to dispel any doubt as to the significance of the name, we turn to the words of the angel who directed Joseph concerning the name that was to be given to the child that was to be born.

In the first chapter of Matthew and in verse 21 we read, She, that is Mary, will give birth to a son and you are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

So the angel makes clear that there's a reason for this name. And so the name in itself carries great significance. Jesus is God's promised Savior, the one to send to save you and me from our sins.

You may recall the queen in her Christmas address, I think it was about four years ago, captured the heart of the matter when she said this, God sent into the world a unique person, neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Savior with the power to forgive.

[26 : 45] Jesus. But also two titles. The first title is the Christ, Jesus Christ. Christ is not Jesus' surname but his title, Jesus the Christ.

It means the anointed one or Messiah. And in the Old Testament God had promised a Messiah. The very one Mark goes on to speak of as having been prophesied by Isaiah.

And Mark is identifying Jesus as the promised Messiah. Now what this means, what it involves, will be developed in what follows in the gospel.

But there's no doubt that a pivotal moment in the whole gospel is reached when we hear the words of Peter recorded in chapter 8 and in verse 29 of this gospel.

Jesus asked Peter, who do you say I am? Peter answered, you are the Christ.

[27 : 50] Mark has introduced Jesus as the Christ at the very beginning of his gospel and he develops this reality, this identity, and then you have this dramatic, pivotal moment in the account when Peter acknowledges that that is indeed so.

You are the Christ. And again, the question for you this morning is can you echo the words of Peter? can you acknowledge and testify that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah, the one sent by God to be your Savior?

Then Jesus is identified in one further way in this first verse as the Son of God. Jesus in Mark's gospel is presented as one who is altogether supernatural.

He is one connected to God in a unique and intimate way, the Son of God. But what does the title mean? What does it mean to describe Jesus as the Son of God?

What does Mark intend us to understand by applying to Jesus this designation, the Son of God? Well again, as we've already suggested with the title, the Christ, Mark will spend much of the gospel answering that question.

[29 : 11] and we won't try and answer it this morning. But as Mark does develop this portrait of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, he will do so in such a way that it will lead us to climactic testimonies of both Jesus Himself and of the centurion at the foot of the cross concerning Jesus as the Son of God.

In chapter 14, you don't need to look up the reference, but in chapter 14 of the gospel, Jesus is on trial before His death. And we read that at the trial, the high priest asked Jesus, are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?

A Jewish form of saying the Son of God. I am, said Jesus. And so, Mark introduces Jesus as the Son of God and then we come to the close of the gospel and Jesus testifies for Himself in the context of this trial.

In answer to the question, are you the Son of God? I am. And then, of course, we know the drama that surrounded the death of Jesus on the cross and the centurion who was on duty there responsible with his fellow soldiers for the act of crucifixion.

And we read in chapter 15 of this same gospel, and when the centurion who stood there in front of Jesus heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, surely this man was the Son of God.

[31 : 02] Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. What we have here, what Mark is presenting to us is epic stuff.

It's about a new beginning like none other, about good news like no other. It's about Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

You might want to keep listening. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for this gospel. We thank you for this good news.

We thank you for the manner in which you used your servant, John Mark, to record for us concerning the coming and life and purpose and mission of Jesus Christ.

And we do pray that you would help us to appreciate the great significance of what we have recorded for us and that you would, by your Spirit, impress its significance ever more firmly upon us.

[32 : 12] And above all, that we would all know what it is to be able to see in Jesus the one who is presented to us in the manner that he is, the Christ, the Son of God.

And all these things we pray in his name. Amen.