

Mark 1:1-8

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[0 : 00] This is the card I was looking for in my pocket, it was in my jacket pocket.

So this is the one, the invitation card for Christianity Explored, so you, I don't know if you can see it from way down there, but if you see a card that looks like this at the door and can make use of one to invite somebody to the course, then please do take as many as you can make use of.

Have you ever started reading a book and after maybe just a couple of pages you reach the conclusion this isn't going to happen? It just hasn't gripped you, or worse, it's left you just a bit confused about where the story is going and you wonder whether there will be any merit in plodding on with the book in question.

It's happened to me a couple of times with the same book. There's a book that you may have heard of, you may not, A Hundred Years of Solitude. It's by a Latin American author, a Colombian author, Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

And given my own Latin American roots, I've on a couple of occasions almost felt a sense of duty to read this classic of modern Latin American literature.

[1 : 28] But I just can't get past the first couple of pages. Maybe I should try harder. I wonder if some of the Roman believers who first read Mark's gospel, Gentile believers largely, not familiar, or largely not familiar with the Old Testament scriptures.

I wonder if as they began to read Mark's gospel, they felt just a little bemused and underwhelmed by its beginning. All his references to, for them, unfamiliar and uninviting Hebrew scriptures.

And this surprising prominence that is given to a Jewish prophet, John the Baptist, with a dubious fashion sense and bizarre eating habits.

I wonder as they read these first few verses, they wondered, well, where is Mark going with this? You can perhaps imagine the more impatient among his readers, mildly protesting, just tell us about Jesus.

Why does Mark begin in the way that he does? Well, he does so precisely to tell us about Jesus.

[2 : 49] By bringing to the fore the words of the prophets and their fulfillment, Mark lays before us, lays before his readers, three foundational truths about Jesus that he will then further explore and develop throughout the gospel.

He lays before us something concerning the place of Jesus, the place of Jesus in the big picture, we might say. He lays before us, crucially, truths concerning the identity of Jesus, who this Jesus is. And he lays before us truths concerning the mission of Jesus, what Jesus came to do. And that's what we want to think about, what we discover, particularly, as I say, in these words of the prophets employed by Mark, who then explains how they found fulfillment.

Before we look at these three elements, let me just very quickly explain something about the Old Testament quotation that we have in verses 2 and 3 of this first chapter of Mark.

Now, the quotation is introduced with the words, it is written in Isaiah, the prophet. But the matter is not quite so straightforward as Mark suggests.

[4 : 19] The quotation that follows there and what follows in verse 2 and verse 3 is, we might call it, a skillfully weaved tapestry of three Old Testament passages.

Two that are easily identifiable, the third not quite so easily identifiable. The three passages are Exodus chapter 23 and verse 20.

You don't need to look up the verses at this stage. Malachi chapter 3, verse 1, and Isaiah chapter 40 and verse 3. We've read the passage earlier in the service.

Now, this morning we'll focus on the latter two, the Malachi passage and the Isaiah passage. It seems likely that Mark chose to give prominence to Isaiah as he wrote what he wrote.

It is written in Isaiah the prophet for a couple of reasons. And really, we can only speculate as to why Mark chose to give prominence to Isaiah. But a couple of reasons that seem convincing. [5 : 22] One would simply be that Isaiah was the most prominent of the prophets and so would have been most familiar even to a Gentile readership. They would have recognized that name more immediately than perhaps Malachi, for example.

But perhaps even more importantly, he focuses on or identifies Isaiah by name because the verse that he draws from Isaiah, which equates to verse 3 in Mark's gospel, is pivotal to Mark's purpose at the beginning of his gospel.

So that's just to very briefly explain something about the background too, the quotation that we have before us, this prophecy that Mark employs. Let's move on then to these three big truths that he lays before us by using this prophecy and sharing with us how it was fulfilled.

First of all, the place of Jesus. The place of Jesus in the big picture. Where does Jesus fit in God's big picture? And I think we can say this.

Jesus is at the heart of God's plan and determination to save sinners. By grounding his gospel in the Old Testament Scriptures, the Word of God, and by employing the formula of divine authority there in verse 2, it is written.

[6 : 54] We have to understand the gravity of those words. It is written. In employing these words, Mark is saying, what I'm going to tell you about isn't just some notion that I have.

This is what God says. It is written. In the Word of God, in the Old Testament Scriptures, this is what is written. And I'll show you how this speaks of the one I am presenting to you, Jesus the Christ, the Son of God.

Mark, in doing this, is able to present Jesus as the one who is at the very heart of God's plan of salvation. Jesus is not some Johnny-come-lately who appears uninvited on the scene of time in a manner that's disconnected with all that God has been doing in and through His people in history. Jesus is at the heart of the New Testament, but He's also at the heart of the Old Testament. It is one story. In the Old Testament, everything points towards Jesus, and in the New Testament, everything revolves around Jesus.

Jesus is at the heart of God's plan and determination to save sinners. But we can go a little further and not say something different, but enrich or add to what we've just said.

[8 : 19] And we can say this, Jesus is the heart of God's unchanging plan and determination to save sinners, with a stress on that additional word, unchanging.

I wonder if we just take a step back. I wonder in your own life, how often do you see the need to have a plan B? Last week, the week before last, I took my car to the garage for its MOT.

Now, those of you who know my car will know that it has seen better days. And I did wonder, as I took the car to the garage, what the damage would be. Well, I wonder that every year when I take it for its MOT, but every year the concern is that bit greater.

My plan A was to get it through the MOT and squeeze another year out of it. In fact, that's the conversation I have with a mechanic every year. We have one conversation a year, and I appear at the garage and I say, I'm wondering if I can squeeze another year out of it.

Sometimes he jumps in ahead of me, and he knows that's what I'm going to say. Well, that was plan A. Get it through its MOT one more year. But I needed a plan B.

[9 : 32] If the bill was going to be too steep, well, I'd buy a new car, or a less old car, to be a bit more precise. In so many circumstances, we need a plan B, sometimes even a plan C.

I should say, in case you're wondering, plan A worked out. I was able to get it through its MOT.

That's by the by. The point is, we often need a plan B, because things don't work out as we would like, or as we intend, or as we plan, in so many circumstances.

What about God? God doesn't do plan B's. It's not the case when we come to the gospel story.

It's not the case that God's plan A went to pot, and God had to get his thinking cap on and work out a new plan to save sinners. The way he tried to do it in the Old Testament, well, that wasn't working.

Let's think of a new plan. No, from eternity and throughout history, history recorded for us in the Bible, the figure of a divine Messiah or Savior is gradually being unveiled by God, the one who would be his Savior.

[10 : 54] The need for a Savior can be traced to the very beginning of human existence in the Garden of Eden, the promise of a Savior is found repeatedly throughout the Old Testament.

The appearance of the promised Savior is what Mark's gospel is all about. God's saving purpose is one, and Jesus is the plan. Mark's use of the Old Testament at the very outset of his gospel serves to reveal and confirm that the one he is speaking of, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is at the heart of God's unchanging plan and determination to save sinners.

So what? Why is that important for you? Well, I would wager that there is no more important task for any man or woman than to discover God's plan of salvation.

And to do so, you'll need to read and search and explore in the Bible, in the New Testament, but also in the Old Testament, for all is concerned with God's appointed Savior, his Son, Jesus Christ. So Mark, by employing these Old Testament scriptures, achieves this first great purpose in presenting Jesus as the one who lies at the very heart of God's purposes.

[12:28] He identifies the place Jesus occupies in the big picture. But he does another thing in employing these prophecies. He reveals to us or lays before us who Jesus is, the identity of Jesus.

Let's move on to that. What do we discover about the identity of Jesus? Well, Mark provides us with helpful clues and pointers as to the identity of Jesus.

There are clues in the prophecies quoted and the manner in which they are quoted, and there are clues in the manner of their fulfillment as recorded by Mark.

If we begin with the clues we find in Mark's use of the prophecies, and there are two in particular that I want to highlight. First of all, if we look at verse 2, then in Mark chapter 1, it is written in Isaiah the prophet, and then what follows, I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way.

Now, that verse is quoted from Malachi chapter 3. Now, Malachi, and it would be good if you were able to just look that up, because what I want to do is to read what it says in Malachi, then read what it says again in Mark, and see if you can spot the difference, because it's in the difference that we have the clue or the insight into the identity of Jesus.

[13:55] Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament, which makes it that little bit easier to find. Malachi chapter 3 and verse 1. So, this is what Mark is quoting from.

See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Just leave it there. So, have that in mind. Just try and take a mental note of that.

See, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then, notice how Mark quotes that verse.

I will send my messenger ahead of you. So, did you spot the difference? He's quoting from Malachi, but he adapts what is said in Malachi for his purposes as he writes it in his gospel.

The word me in Malachi is changed to you in Mark. Now, who is the me in Malachi? Well, it's clear that it's God. God is speaking, and God is speaking of how he will come to fulfill his purpose, his saving purpose.

[15:04] And who is the you in Mark? Well, it's Jesus. Now, this is huge in terms of its significance, in terms of what Mark is telling us about the identity of Jesus.

He is identifying Jesus with God. Then, in verse 3, we have a quote from Isaiah, chapter 40 and verse 3.

And we've read that passage already. We maybe don't need to turn to it again. But in the original prophecy, again, the question, who is the one to come? Well, if you were to, with a little care, read through the passage, it would be very clear, indeed it's stated explicitly, that the one who is to come is the Lord.

Yahweh, the name that God revealed for himself. I think I will just read the whole verse. Because in addition to identifying the one to come as the Lord, he is identified as God.

So let me just read the verse. Isaiah 40, verse 3. A voice of one calling in the desert, sorry, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord.

[16:18] So the one who's coming, for whom the way needs to be prepared is the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. It's very clear. The one who is to come, the one for whom a way needs to be prepared, is the Lord.

It's Yahweh. It's God. And in whom is the prophecy fulfilled, according to Mark? Well, what does Mark do there in verse 3?

He says, a voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. And immediately, Mark goes on to identify the one who is preparing the way as John the Baptist, and the one for whom the way is being prepared as Jesus.

So again, Mark identifies Jesus with God. Jesus is the Lord.

Jesus is Yahweh. Jesus is God. So we have clues in the prophecies themselves and how they're employed, but also clues in the fulfillment of the prophecy, and especially what Mark identifies as John the Baptist's message.

[17:28] In verse 7 we read, and this was his message. Of course, Mark chooses to summarize it. In the other gospel accounts, we're given more information about what John said.

But here Mark focuses on what we can reasonably presume was the core of John the Baptist's message. And what does the message tell us?

What clues does it give us concerning the identity of Jesus? Well, there in verse 7, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as one more powerful than I.

He identifies Jesus also as one who is worthy in great manner. As we were seeing with the children, John was not worthy to untie the thongs of the sandals and wash his feet.

Well, that points in some measure towards his identity, but by itself it certainly doesn't establish his identity.

[18:28] But in verse 8, we have something much more significant that is at the heart of John the Baptist's message. In verse 8, John indicates that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Now, this is huge in terms of pointing us in the direction of who Jesus is. You see, in the Old Testament, baptizing with the Spirit or pouring out the Spirit is always presented as the sole prerogative of God.

Let me just give you three examples of God speaking in the Old Testament about his plans with regard to giving or pouring out his Spirit. Three different prophets.

We'll simply read the verses with no commentary and see how it's always God who is presented as the one who pours out his Spirit, who baptizes with his Spirit.

We begin with the prophet Isaiah, chapter 44 and verse 3, For I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour out my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants.

[19:39] God is speaking. This is what I'll do. From Ezekiel. Prophet Ezekiel, chapter 11, verses 19 and 20. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them.

I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God.

The prophet Joel, chapter 2, from verse 28. God is speaking, announcing what he will do in the future. And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people.

Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.

What do we conclude? What is the only plausible and reasonable conclusion in the light of the evidence deployed by Mark?

[20:42] Well, it is this, that Jesus, in baptizing with the Spirit, exercises a divine prerogative. And he does so because he is divine.

He is God. He is the Son of God. He is, in the language of the Nicene Creed, very God of very God. This is at the heart of the gospel about Jesus Christ, who he is.

He is fully human, one who wore sandals on his dusty feet, and he is also fully God. God promised to come and to save.

And God did come and save in the person of Jesus. Well, again, we ask, so what? What is the significance of this? Why is this important for you?

Well, this discovery concerning who Jesus is, is a discovery that, if rightly understood, must drive you to your knees in worship.

[21:46] And with Thomas of old, cry out, my Lord and my God. Mark presents to us who Jesus is at the very beginning of his gospel.

But he also presents to us something of the mission of Jesus, what he came to do. And there are two aspects of Jesus' mission that I want you to note that are hinted at.

The first is hinted at and also explicitly declared. The second is explicitly declared. The first that is hinted at concerns what his mission would involve for Jesus.

And the intriguing word that we need to focus on, that we find repeatedly in verses 2 and 3, is the word way or path. I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way, the way that Jesus would walk on.

A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, the way of the Lord, make straight paths for Him. So there is this reference in the prophecy, and as Mark employs it, to the way of or for the Lord.

[23 : 02] Jesus' mission in some fashion would involve walking the way set out and prepared for Him. But that immediately begs the question, where would that way or path lead?

And Mark doesn't tell us at this point, at this juncture. Of course, he will tell us, but he doesn't tell us yet. Where does this way lead?

Does it lead to a palace? Does it lead to a throne? Well, it did eventually lead to a throne, but before getting to the throne, it led to the cross.

That is where the way set out for Jesus led. It led to Calvary. Jesus the Christ, the Son of God, came to die.

This was His mission. He came to walk the way of obedience and obedience unto death. He came to walk the way marked out for Him by His Father.

[24 : 05] He set His face to Jerusalem. He walked the way to Golgotha, to a cruel cross, to die for sinners. And this lay at the very heart of His mission.

But Mark also, as he begins his gospel, gives us an insight into what this mission of Jesus would secure for us. That takes us back to what Mark says concerning Jesus baptizing baptizing with the Holy Spirit.

You see, everything that Jesus' mission, His life, His death, His resurrection, secures for us is encapsulated in this one expression of John the Baptist. But He, Jesus, will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

This expression points to the fulfillment of all of God's promises in the Old Testament and indeed more besides. Forgiveness of sins, the gift of Christ's righteousness, friendship with God, adoption into God's family, a new heart, and a renewed mind, eternal life and security, and we could go on. All secured by Jesus and sealed to us as Jesus baptizes us with the Holy Spirit.

[25 : 27] Now, it then begs the question, well, when did Jesus do this? And we're going to be thinking more about that this evening, not just focusing on this verse but more generally. But we can certainly say this, that John, as he speaks of Jesus in this way, is looking to Pentecost but also beyond Pentecost to Jesus today baptizing his people with the Holy Spirit.

What Jesus' mission secures for us. Mark presents to you Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

He is the one who is at the heart of God's eternal purpose to save a people for himself. He is the one who came to love and to save.

He is the one who died in your place and secured for you all the promises of God. What will you do with him?

Believe in him. Trust in him. Bow down and worship him. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Son.

[26 : 42] We thank you for Jesus. We thank you that you so love the world that you sent your one and only Son. That whosoever believes in him should not perish but know and enjoy everlasting life.

We pray that that would be our experience, that as we are presented before us with the person of your Son, we would believe in him, we would trust in him, we would bow down and worship him.

And we ask that by your Spirit you would enable us ever so to do. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.