

**The Story of Christmas
Through the Eyes of Mark
Mark 1:1-20**

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Text Introduction: This month we are considering the Christmas story as told by the authors of the four Gospels. Last week, we looked at Matthew's account; today we consider Mark's account. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all give us a little bit different version. This is not contradictory, understand, but complementary. Some like Luke, give us a lot of detail; others, like Mark, do not give us much. Actually, if it is the traditional Christmas story that you are looking for with Joseph, Mary, the baby, a stable, shepherds, you will not find it in Mark. But, when we really understand what the Christmas story is all about—the incarnation of Jesus—the coming of Jesus into our world and the implications of such—you will certainly discover that story here.

Text: The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

Look, I am sending My messenger ahead of You,
who will prepare Your way.

³ A voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

Prepare the way for the Lord;
make His paths straight!

⁴ John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were flocking to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. ⁶ John wore a camel-hair garment with a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He was preaching: "Someone more powerful than I will come after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the strap of His sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ As soon as He came up out of the water, He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending to Him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven:

You are My beloved Son;
I take delight in You!

¹² Immediately the Spirit drove Him into the wilderness. ¹³ He was in the wilderness 40 days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels began to serve Him.

¹⁴ After John was arrested, Jesus went to Galilee, preaching the good news of God: ¹⁵ "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe in the good news!"

¹⁶ As He was passing along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, Simon's brother. They were casting a net into the sea, since they were fishermen.

¹⁷ “Follow Me,” Jesus told them, “and I will make you fish for people!” ¹⁸ Immediately they left their nets and followed Him. ¹⁹ Going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in their boat mending their nets. ²⁰ Immediately He called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed Him.

Introduction: We assume that the author of this Gospel is the John Mark of Paul’s missionary travels. This was the view of the early church and has never been seriously challenged by evangelical scholars. Peter referred to Mark as his son (1 Peter 5:13). One cannot help but think that Mark learned much of the details about the life of Christ from the memory of Peter. While we assume that Matthew was written to a Jewish audience, most assume that Mark was written with a Roman audience in mind. The assumption is made because of internal evidence in the Gospel. First, Mark uses Latin terms to explain Greek ideas as in reference to a Roman coin in 12:42 and to the courtyard in 15:16. Second, Mark took the time to translate Aramaic expressions, which Romans would likely not understand as in 5:41 and 7:34. Also, Mark occasionally explained Jewish customs such as the washing of hands before eating as in 7:3-4.¹

The other visible factor that distinguishes Mark is the obvious brevity. One story that is absent is the entire birth narrative and genealogy. For a Roman audience the genealogy would not be important. I’m not sure that there is a real theological reason for Mark’s brevity. His purpose like other Gospels is to tell the Good News about Christ. Most scholars speculate that Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels. They reason that Matthew, Luke, and John had access to Mark’s Gospel as they wrote their account. They added details to Mark’s already established outline.

An Important word in Mark: Immediately!

Some have attributed Mark’s brevity to a sense of urgency in the message. For example, his abrupt beginning lends itself to the thinking of getting to the heart of the matter. The word “immediately” is used over 40 times, while the same word only occurs 12 other times in the rest of the New Testament!²

So, let’s let this word “immediately” guide our thinking today.

An Immediate Reason for Jesus’ Coming (1-11)

Good News! Indeed Mark gets right to the point. “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” Perhaps you have heard many times that the Gospel means “good news.” Jesus’ coming was and is “good news.” I’m always struck at Easter time that we cannot adequately celebrate Easter without celebrating Christmas. That is, we do not understand His coming apart from His death, burial, and resurrection.

A little later in Mark, Mark describes the reason for Jesus’ coming in quite specific terms. Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

I introduced this idea last week, but let me go a little deeper this morning. Jesus takes the disciples aside to tell them of the plan of His death. We know this story rather well, but this is the first time that the disciples are hearing of Jesus’ death. Based upon their reactions at His death and resurrection, it is clear

¹ *An Introduction to the New Testament*, D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, 95, 99.

² Walter Elwell, ed. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

that the disciples do not fully understand what Jesus has in mind. However, we do understand that the disciples understand that danger lurks.

What is difficult to understand at first glance is the reactions of the disciples. Their reactions indicate several ungodly attitudes.

- Greed (v. 35)—We are always on pretty shaky ground when we ask what James and John asked. “We want you to do for us whatever we ask.”
- Selfishness (v. 37)—Jesus has just revealed His coming death. What is the response of these two disciples? They ask to sit at the right and left of Jesus in His kingdom. When all of the focus should be on Him, these two disciples shift the focus to themselves. Selfishness. I wonder if we ever do the same. What about when we come to worship? The focus should be on Him, but instead, we shift the focus to us. What about Christmas? The focus should be on Him, but instead the focus is on so many other things.
- Arrogance (v. 39)—When Jesus reveals to James and John that they are not able to drink the cup and be baptized in His baptisms (both references to His death), in arrogance, they say they are able.
- Jealousy (v. 41)—Verse 41 indicates that these ungodly attitudes are not confined to James and John. When the rest of the disciples find out about the request, they are angry. They are not angry that James and John have made the request. Rather, Jesus’ response to all of them most likely indicates that they are angry that they may not be considered along with James and John.
- The Desire for Power (v. 42-43)—Jesus’ response shows the disciples’ ungodly appetite for power.

These and other similar attitudes still keep people from seeing why Jesus came!

Jesus’ own Statement as to Why He Came!

“to serve and to give His Life a ransom for many”

- A Plan “(He came)” —Jesus came to die. This was the plan before the foundation of the world. God did not panic and say, “What am I going to do with humanity? What am I going to do with all of this sin?” Listen to what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:20-21, “*He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*”
- A Present “to give” —Jesus gave us the first Christmas present when He gave us Himself.
- His Person “His Life” —In his book *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, Henry Scougal, the seventeenth-century Scottish minister, said, “God hath long contended with a stubborn world, and thrown down many a blessing upon them; and when all his other gifts could not prevail, he at last made a gift of himself.”

- A Picture “a ransom”—The most theologically significant part of this phrase is perhaps in the word, “ransom.” The word was used in the first century to refer to releasing someone from slavery, prison, or a debt. Jesus referred to our sin problem in terms of slavery as recorded in John 8:34. “Jesus answered them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin.’”

Debbie Blakeney, a Kindergarten teacher in our Christian school here at First Baptist, tells a wonderful story of a few years ago. The Kindergarten classes were concluding their Christmas program with singing “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” The song was to conclude with the children going to get placards with letters that when standing in the right order said to the crowd, “Merry Christmas.” In rehearsals, one student, the boy with the “c,” kept getting in the wrong order, and so “Merry Christmas” was never getting spelled. On the day before the program, they finally got it all right. But, in the program, the student took his place next to the two students holding “r” so that it read to the crowd “MERRCY HISTMAS.” Out of order, yes, but perhaps the little kindergarten student made more of a theological statement than he could know—Christmas is truly about God’s mercy! This is why He came. This is the immediate reason.

An Immediate Reality of Jesus’ Coming (14-15)

We have considered the meaning of His coming—our ransom, His forgiveness. If that is the meaning of His coming, what is the message of His coming? What is the reality of His coming? Verse 14 and 15 puts this reality into simple terms: Repent and believe *in the good news!*

This message from Jesus is the same one preached by John the Baptist. John the Baptist preached to prepare people for the message from Jesus. What are we to do with this mercy? We are to repent and believe in the good news. If not, we miss the whole meaning of Christmas.

An Illustration from Mark

The entire contents of the Gospel, story upon story, seek to show that Jesus is the Son God. Near the end comes the greatest proof of all from a Roman centurion. Having been an eyewitness to Jesus’ death and the surrounding events of His death, the Roman centurion exclaimed, “Surely this man was the Son of God” (15:39). What greater proof than a Roman centurion along with the subsequent account of Jesus’ resurrection to give final evidence that He was the Son of God? Many then and many today miss the reality of Jesus’ coming, but this soldier did not.

In December 1903, after many attempts, the Wright brothers were successful in getting their “flying machine” off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: “We have actually flown 120 feet—will be home for Christmas.” Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, “How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas.” He totally missed the big news—man had flown!

So many people today miss the story of Jesus coming into this world.

An Immediate Response to Jesus’ Coming (16-20)

Last, we see that Jesus got an immediate response from those He first encountered. What does Christmas call us to do? Christmas calls us to be ...

- Followers—We are called to follow.
- Fishers—Once followers, we are called to join Him in asking others to follow.

As we say around here at First Baptist, know Him and and make Him known! That is the call of Christ. That is the call of Christmas.