

The Beginning of the Gospel

Jonathan Dodson | January 10, 2014

This series *Son of God* picks up where we left off in December, the coming of God, taking us into: the Life of God, the Death of God, the Resurrection of God all in the person of Christ. Like a film, these four movements are part of a larger story that will include many different (not all) scenes from the Gospel of Mark. As we near the end, we will move beyond Mark to see the “post-credit” scene to the return of Christ. Our artwork hand drawn by Jeremiah Chaney reflects this Christ-centered narrative. You’ll notice the circle, with the Greek letters Chi & Ro in the middle; those are the first two letters of CHRIST in Greek. On either side of the letters are the Greek letters, alpha and omega, indicating the beginning and the end. This is a story, from beginning to end, about Jesus who sums up all things. His narrative—life, death, resurrection, and return—mirrors, in some way, our own stories. We begin our lives with options wide open, but as we age we encounter conflict and narrowing possibilities, until we reach death. But if Christ intersects your story, you get a plot twist that frees you to turn everything around and follow Jesus into a whole new world of possibility. Let’s step into this story, following Jesus through Mark in six broad movements: Jordan River, Galilee, Gentile Regions, Journey, Jerusalem, Return to Galilee.¹

Jesus at the Jordan

Mark’s Gospel opens by running the flag up the mast: “[The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God](#)” (Mark 1:1). The flag emblazoned with *the gospel* but what does it mean? Is this a literary term referring to a genre of writing (Gospel of Mark) or is it a theological term referring the good news concerning Jesus? Well, Mark’s Gospel was likely written between 60-80 AD, and the word “gospel” wasn’t used to refer to books with the message of Jesus in it until around 150. So it can’t be the genre. What is he saying, then, when he announces that this is the “*beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ*”? To understand this, we need to take a cue from verse 2 and step back into the Isaianic prelude to see the gospel through his eyes: “[As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight](#)” (1:2-3). This is a composite citation, drawing from Malachi (2) and Isaiah (3). To understand the beginning of the gospel, we need to know its prelude. *Malachi* tells Israel about a messenger who would go before Israel to prepare for the coming of God. According to Malachi it is a prophet like Elijah who would warn of judgment and promise forgiveness. Follow this prophetic thread and it leads us right into our first major scene, **Jordan**, where it all begins, in the desert, out in the wilderness, outside the city, where John the Baptizer, dressed like its John vs. the World, is calling Israel out of her religious slums to receive baptism and forgiveness of sins! (Do you hear him?) John’s location in the wilderness, at the edge of the holy city, should trigger a memory, Israel’s beginnings after the exodus in the wilderness of Sinai, in need of forgiveness before crossing the Jordan to enter the promised land. Similarly, 1st C Israel needs a 2nd exodus, to cross the baptismal Jordan out into the desert, where they can repent and receive forgiveness from God. Why? They have contaminate

¹ See David Rhoads et. al, *Mark as Story* for more on this progression.

faith [ILL]. Many of them are so secularized or Hellenized that you can't tell them apart from the Greeks. They have become soft, no zeal, flat one dimensional Christians. No vibrant witness of distinct life. They need to repent, turn around. Are you in religious slum using the language but not the life of Christ? Maybe you're in the desert? Do you feel distant from God? Un-confessed sin will create distance from God (Ps 51). This week, while on my knees in prayer, I confessed apathy, pride, lust, anger. You know what happened? Instead of agony and paralyzing guilt, I encountered spiritual renewal, awakening, and expectation. Why? **When we turn around we face something better.** John announces turn around, Jesus shows us where to turn around. Malachi sends a messenger; Isaiah sends the Message "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." This passage goes on to describe mountains being leveled and valleys being raised up to create a cosmic pathway for God to tread (royal steps appear and click into place). It is the way of the Lord *and* the Lord who makes a way. This WAY, Isaiah announces, is the glory of the Lord revealed before all flesh. Its so magnificent you have to get up on a mountain to take it in, where seeing God's greatness and tenderness, you break out announcing good news, literally the gospel: **Go on up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" (40:9).** If you're beholding this God your bound to talk about him. When we turn around this is who we see. *This is the prelude to the beginning of the gospel*, the promise of a cosmic King who steps on mountains to make way to know him and follow him. HE is one who goes before us and does all the work. When we turn around, we turn to a Savior so great and tender that are met with humbling grace. A God who goes before us, through the cross and death, out into creation to make a way to receive us. But when we refuse to confess our sins, we drift, spiritually distant, hard, and dry. Don't insist on the blandness of the city and the gods of another kingdom. It will be your demise. Kneel in glad confession in front of a God who goes before us, does all the work. Who is this God? John says he is the one who comes after me is mightier/STRONGER (able to defeat a soldier and take away his armor, Lk 11:22). Think about who is saying this.

John is no weak man. He is a prophet, tough enough to survive on the land, brave enough to call his own people to repentance, radical enough to be beheaded by the maniacal Herod, the local ruler. **When strong men make weak statements we should listen.** When Aragorn bows to Frodo, Jordan passes to Kerr for the '97 finals win, and John takes a knee, we should snap up and pay attention. John confesses his unworthiness to untie the sandal of Jesus. Why? Because he has low self esteem? No, because he has met greatness, and when we meet greatness we gladly take a knee. He doesn't have an overblown view of himself. He's not caught up with what people think about him; he's riveted on the coming one. He doesn't care what people think about his clothes, his career, his reputation; he cares about Christ. You are obsessed with what people think of you. You carry an idol of reputation that is so big it obscures your vision of the cosmic God. This makes you anxious, fret over outfits and career impressions. People aren't great, worthy of feeling unworthy. God is great, and though we are unworthy he makes us worthy. He makes a way. His great beauty is humbles us and lifts us, like the mountains and the valleys. *You have a beauty like no other and a confidence that brings me fear/if I compare myself too long I might just run away/you have a **grace** that keeps me here* - "Fires", David Ramirez. When you turn

around to **Christ, you get glory and grace**. Some of you are all about the grace, and as a result its become cheap, no glory. Others are all about the glory, as a result, you've become distant, no grace. John knows that Israel is stranded in slavery to religious and cultural gods, and he's calling her out of the city to meet Jesus at the Jordan. To meet glory *and* grace. Will you meet him or remain aloof, unwilling to confess your sins, dominated by the city and by what others think? Someone greater is here. His name is Jesus. How does he do it? John baptizes with water; Jesus baptizes with the Spirit. The water *symbolizes* cleansing, but the Spirit is the person who does the *actual* cleansing. Turn around face Jesus and receive his stunning glory and forgiving grace. So you see, Isaiah and Malachi prelude the gospel—**good news of Someone greater and more gracious**—but *John* shows us the beginnings of the gospel in the person of Christ. That's the beginning, the Jordan.

Desert King Interlude. Before reentering Israel, Jesus takes an interlude entering the wilderness symbolizes his representation of Israel, succeeding where they fail, defeating embodied evil, Satan, and dwelling with beasts and angels. This short scene transmits some very important information to the reader of Mark's Gospel. While Jesus is the long-awaited Christ to bring forgiveness and cleansing through the Spirit, **he is also a cosmic King**, come to upend wrongs, reverse creational disorder, and overthrow the powers that threaten this world with disease, death, deceit, and destruction. This is no little man, no mistaken messiah. The message too big and the claim too clear—Jesus Christ is the Spirit anointed Son of God come to bring God's rule into the world: ["Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."](#) Next is Galilee.

Galilee

In Galilee Jesus engages in ministry to the religious Jews through preaching, discipling, healing, and demonic encounters. The possibilities of the kingdom are wide open. He encounters swelling crowds but then faces increasing opposition. Throngs of people press in to see him progressively moving him out of a house, to the hillside, out to a boat, and eventually to the desert for a break. The kingdom is a mix of advance and recession, of **influence and opposition**. Anyone who would come after Jesus must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow the one who does all the work. Every disciple is called to live in this tension. It is not optional. Are you willing to embrace the opposition as well as the influence? Willing to take stands at work, give grace to others in the church, sacrifice the golden calf of entertainment and media to play with (and disciple) your children, expend your singleness in kingdom efforts, date your wife, honor your husband, bless your City Group, and go deep down into discipleship in a Fight Club? Are you willing to be real enough to open up with others or will you continue to hide behind a religious facade?

Gentile

Jesus is a radical Jew who loves indiscriminately, across ethnic borders and religious categories, skeptic, Latino, low and high class. Here he faces spiritual opposition (Legion in 10 Cities) and spiritual hunger (Syro-Phoenician woman). Things are getting harder. We must join him. Will you follow him into your neighbor's house, into your coworkers heart, into your friends judgment of Christianity? 76% People! Stake a gospel-centered flag

downtown. Form a City Group. Stop playing with temporal things and start living under the rule of God in the heart of the city. Open your mouth and your hands to the spiritually distant and physically poor.

Journey

After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus warns them of his impending death and starts his journey toward the city of God, the city of his demise. 8 times “the way” is mentioned, and Jesus charts the way to follow him, take your cross and follow me, it entails **cost**. Cost of Discipleship is tied up with disobeying yourself and obeying God, as Herman Melville put it in *Moby Dick*: “[But all the things that God would have us do are hard for us to do— remember that— and hence, he oftener commands us than endeavors to persuade. And if we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists.](#)”² Jesus throws down the gauntlet. He’s not looking for fans; he’s calling disciples. People who will follow in his wake not matter what the cost. **He calls us to follow him no matter what by focusing on what matters most.** This might mean moving to Montreal, Uganda, or Thailand or simply walking across the street to meet your neighbor and invite them over for dinner to talk about the deep things of life and build community. I don’t know where it is, but if you’re gonna follow JESUS its gonna cost you. Opposition and advance, but it will be worth every penny.

Jerusalem

When Jesus reaches Jerusalem everything falls apart. The crowds die out, his disciples abandon him; he is seized by the Roman authorities, rejected by his own people, and skewered to a tree to die. What started with wide open kingdom possibilities ends in a bloody death. But this is just the beginning of the gospel, Jesus rises from the dead skewering sin, death, and evil in radiant resurrection power. The story continues. Jesus is crucified and raised to secure the whole gospel story, to ensure your forgiveness and the renewal of the world. His resurrection is so great, and so neglected, that we will spend four Sundays on it exploring its implausibility, promise, and power. We will ask skeptics to bring their doubts and believers to push back on their faith to grasp the meaning of the resurrection. This will be part of a national campaign by HarperCollins who is publishing our book *Raised? Finding Jesus by Doubting the Resurrection*. We will give away the book, along with four films following our friends Ben and Jessica Roberts from doubt to faith in the risen Christ by our very own Peter Craig. A platform, rooted in Austin, to spark resurrection faith across the nation, in the risen Lord. PRAY.

Return to Galilee: Ends of the Earth

Jesus rises to reverse his climactic demise, and reverses everything. He begins a new order of humanity in his resurrection body, stakes new creation in the ground, and goes back to Galilee to meet his disciples there, “[But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you](#)” (16:7). Jesus is always going ahead of us as he always has, **making a way, greater and gracious**, help us complete his mission of bringing the rule of God to the ends of the earth. He reminds his

² Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (Kindle Locations 797-799). Feedbooks. This citation was brought to my attention by Mark Sayers, *Facing Leviathan* (forthcoming).

disciples that the good news will go forth to all peoples and into all the world until he returns coming with glory in the clouds to gather his peoples from the ends of the earth. Jesus is calling you Will you follow? In the words of Lord Huron: [“To the ends of the earth would you follow me, there’s a world that was meant for us to see. If you wont I must say my goodbyes to thee.”](#)³ Will you **follow Jesus no matter what the cost, because you have found the one who matters most?** Will you risk reputation, wealth, and embrace opposition and influence, to give the world the gospel? I’m nervous and excited. What will God ask? No matter what, it will be worth it, every penny. How do I know? He is the God who goes before us *and* the God who returns for us. The beginning of the gospel, is in the one who never ends, the Alpha & Omega. Will you follow him to the ends of the earth? Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

³ Lord Huron “Ends of the Earth” *Lonesome Dreams*