

March 2, 2025

TESTIMONY TO THE IDENTITY OF JESUS

Mark 1:1-13

(1 of 22 in a series through Mark 1-9)

In Matthew 16, Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt 16:15). That question is the most important question any of us will ever answer. To say that our lives depend on answering that question rightly is an understatement. Our eternal destiny depends on answering that question rightly. But thankfully answering this question for us is the focus of the book we’ll be going through over the next several months as we look at the gospel of Mark. The aim of this book is to tell us who Jesus is and what he has done so that we might believe in him and have life.

In that way, Mark is no different from the other gospels. That’s why all the gospels are written. They’re written to show us who Jesus is and what he has done so that we might repent and believe in him. But this doesn’t mean that there are no differences between Mark and the other gospels because there are quite a few differences. For one, it’s the shortest of the gospels. It only has sixteen chapters. And in these chapters, you’ll find a lot less of Jesus’ teaching than the other gospels. Others have noted¹ that whereas Matthew’s gospel contains twenty parables of Jesus and Luke includes twenty-five, you’ll only find seven in Mark’s gospel, and a few of those are quite abbreviated. Instead of Jesus’ teaching being the main priority, Mark focuses more on Jesus’ actions. Because of this, it feels like a fast-paced gospel. If you read it, you’ll soon realize that one of Mark’s favorite words is “immediately.” Mark uses the word nine times in chapter 1 alone. We read that “the Spirit immediately” drives Jesus into the wilderness (v. 12), “immediately” the disciples leave their nets and follow Jesus (v. 18), “immediately” Jesus enters the synagogue on the sabbath (v. 21), and [my personal favorite] “and immediately there was in the synagogue a man with an unclean spirit” (v. 23). I don’t know how someone can be immediately present somewhere, but I like it. Mark’s gospel almost feels like it’s being narrated by a guy with a camera giving running commentary as he sprints from scene to scene.

But it’s not just that the gospel *moves* quickly, it *begins* quickly as well. In Matthew and Luke’s gospels, we have Jesus’ birth narratives and genealogy provided. They take their time ramping up to the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. But not Mark. After only a few verses of prologue, we find Jesus teaching and calling people to follow him.

The most important element in Mark’s gospel, however, is what it has in common with all the other gospels. Jesus is the main character. He is the focus. Most scholars believe that the gospel of Mark was written before Matthew, Luke, or John had written theirs. What this means is that Mark was the pioneer for this literary form called a “gospel.” We know that *the* gospel is the

¹ For example, Mark Dever, *Promises Kept: The Message of the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 62.

good news that Jesus lived, died for our sins, was buried, and was raised from the dead on the third day so that we might repent, believe, and have forgiveness of sins and eternal life. But what is *a* gospel. What do we mean when we read the title of this book in our Bibles as “The *Gospel* According to Mark”?

It's not like our modern biographies or even ancient biographies. Jesus is obviously the focus, but we get nothing about his childhood at all. We know nothing of Jesus' education or maturity and development throughout his adolescence. Most of his life is skipped over altogether. Most of what we are told about what Jesus did is limited to the last few weeks of his life. We're not even told what he looked like. So what was Mark doing with this book that he begins, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (v. 1)? He was telling us what is necessary for us to understand about who Jesus is and what he did so that you and I might believe and have life. That's his aim. And that's why when we start into the first thirteen verses (as we're doing this morning), we see that the focus is on who Jesus is.

What I think Mark is doing in these opening verses is he's providing for us the witness or testimony of four different sources as to who Jesus is. Why do we believe that Jesus is God the Son incarnate? It's because that's who the Bible tells us he is. In fact, in our text this morning, we see the testimony of the OT prophets, John the Baptist, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit, each telling us who Jesus is. Therefore, let's follow each of these as we work through the text and see who Jesus is. First, the testimony of the OT prophets.

The testimony of the OT prophets

After everything I've said and Mark's proclamation as he opens his gospel with the words, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (v. 1), the next few verses might feel a bit surprising. I say that because they're Old Testament quotations from the prophets that focus not on Jesus but on John the Baptist. Let me show you what I mean.

Immediately after his introductory statement about what this book is about, Mark writes, “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”’” (vv. 2-3). These are actually quotes from two different OT texts: Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Mark is combining them together intentionally because he understands that they're referring to the same person and the same reality. The reason he credits Isaiah is most likely because Isaiah is the better known prophet and because the portion he's quoting from Isaiah is the longer of the two texts he's drawing from.

What holds these two OT prophetic quotations together is the reference to the “messenger” who will come and prepare the way from Malachi and the “voice” crying in the wilderness from Isaiah. Mark quotes both of these texts because he's identifying the person being referenced in each of these texts as John the Baptist. We know he's identifying John as the messenger and voice from these two texts because *immediately* after quoting these texts, he writes, “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins”

(v. 4). Then, he notes that John's ministry was proclaiming that one greater was coming after him, namely, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, we know that Mark is identifying John the Baptist as this messenger preparing the way for the Lord because it is right after this declaration in Malachi 3:1 that the prophet declares that the Lord would send "Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes" (Mal 4:5). Now, why would noting that this messenger is an Elijah the prophet help us see that Mark is saying, "It's John the Baptist?" Two reasons. First, Elijah was known to dress, well, quite odd. We have a story that validates that from 2 Kings 1. In that chapter, Ahaziah is king, and he fell, injured himself, and it looked like he might die. Therefore, he sent some messengers to go inquire (not of the LORD but) of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron to see if he is going to recover or die. So, the messengers set off, but Elijah the prophet intercepts them with a message from the Lord. And the message is that because Ahaziah was willing to seek insight from this false god instead of the one true God, he will not recover but will die. So they go back to the king and give him the bad news.

At this point, the king wants to know who in the world this man was who intercepted them and delivered this bad news. The problem, however, is that the messengers didn't get the man's name. They simply said, "He wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist," and, of course, the king instantly knew who he was, declaring, "It is Elijah the Tishbite" (2 Kings 1:8). In other words, a garment of hair and a leather belt wasn't common attire in that day (or any day, for that matter).

So, with that in mind, notice how Mark describes John the Baptist in verse 6. He writes, "Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey." Now, we may hear that and think, "What an odd guy!" But if we know our OT, we should read it and say, "Just like Elijah!"

The second reason we know that Mark is identifying John as the messenger preparing the way of the Lord is because Jesus will tell us in Matthew 11:14 (after quoting Malachi 3:1 about a messenger coming to prepare the way of the Lord), "If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." So, Mark couldn't be writing any more clearly in saying, "John the Baptist is the messenger, the Elijah, that Malachi prophesied would come, and he is the voice in the wilderness that Isaiah said would come." Again, you'd have to be intentionally ignoring it to miss that point if you're familiar with the OT prophets.

But what does this have to do with Jesus? Okay, that's the right question to ask. And here's the answer. The messenger who would prepare the way in Malachi 3:1 was preparing the way for the coming of the Lord. He was preparing the way for God to come. Likewise, the voice crying in the wilderness "prepare the way" was specifically crying, "Prepare the way *of the Lord.*" In other words, the voice and messenger were saying, "God is coming to his people."

So, if John is this messenger and voice, who was it that he announced was coming? Well, watch how Mark shows this. In verse 8 he tells us that John was preaching, saying, "After me comes he

who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” And (let us say) *immediately* in verse 9 he writes, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Do you see what he’s doing? He’s saying that John prepared the way for and announced the coming of God himself, and the one who prepared the way for and announced the coming of was Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, Jesus is the Lord himself. He is God the Son. Thus, we have the testimony of the OT prophets telling us that Jesus is God the Son as they are fulfilled in John the Baptist’s ministry.² But second, we have the testimony of John himself.

The testimony of John the Baptist

Mark tells us that John was out baptizing and preaching in the wilderness and people were coming to him, confessing their sins. Then, after his description of John’s clothing, he notes what John was preaching. And we’ve already seen this, but let me highlight one other element. John specifically said, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (vv. 7-8).

Now, obviously, John testifies that Jesus is much, much greater than he. But it’s actually what he says that Jesus will do that testifies to who Jesus is in a greater way. He notes that Jesus would baptize his people with the Holy Spirit. Why, then, does that testify to who Jesus is? Here’s why. In the OT, it is clear that only God bestows his Spirit on anyone. No mere man can bestow the Spirit of God on someone. For example, in Joel 2:28, the Lord declares through the prophet, “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.” Would anyone dare suggest that someone other than God himself has the right and ability to pour out *God’s* Spirit on anyone? Of course not. And yet John’s message is to declare that Jesus will do that very thing.

Thus, it is not just that John—the voice, messenger, and Elijah of the prophets—prepares the way for Jesus that shows he is the Lord, it’s his message that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit that also shows us that Jesus is God the Son. Thus, we have the testimony of the OT prophets and the testimony of John the Baptist. And we also have the testimony of God the Father.

The testimony of God the Father

As John announces the arrival of Jesus, the one who is mightier and comes after him, Mark tells us that Jesus steps onto the scene. This is Jesus beginning his public ministry, and the first thing he does is to be baptized of John. Mark writes, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of

² Also, when you take in the full weight of Jesus identifying his own forerunner—John the Baptist—as the Elijah to come, this is an explicit declaration of Jesus about his own identity. Jesus, after all, knew that Malachi declared that the Elijah to come would announce the arrival of the Lord himself.

Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan” (v. 9). Now, Mark says nothing about why Jesus would be baptized, though it seems that he is simply identifying with his followers, since Jesus would have had no sins to confess. But what I want us to see is what happens after he’s baptized. Mark writes, “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove, and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (vv. 10-11).

This one takes little connection in order to see that God the Father is declaring Jesus to be God the Son. Who else could declare from heaven, “You are my beloved Son” and send his Spirit on him except God the Father? Thus, we have another testimony that Jesus is God the Son. But actually we can say more.

The declaration, “You are my beloved Son” seems to be an echo of other declarations the Lord made in the OT. For example, remember when the Lord made a covenant with David to raise up his offspring after him to be king over God’s eternal kingdom? Specifically the Lord said to David about this one who would come from David’s line, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam 7:14). And from that time forward, because of this promise, every time one of David’s sons was bestowed on the throne, the words of Psalm 2 (an enthronement psalm) should have been read, wherein God declares to the king, “You are my son; today I have begotten you” (Psalm 2:7).

Therefore, when the Father declares of Jesus, “You are my son,” this seems to be a clear echo of the language that he would use of David’s great son to come, the Messiah. In other words, God the Father is not merely declaring that Jesus is God the Son but that he is the human king promised from David’s line. He’s the promised Messiah. Now, yes, he’s also God the Son, as Isaiah makes clear that the promised one from David’s line would fittingly be called “Mighty God” (Is 9:6). But he’s also a man. He’s the God-man.

But there’s more. It seems the Father is not merely echoing the words of 2 Samuel 7:14 or Psalm 2:7 of Jesus but also Isaiah 42:1. I say this because Isaiah 42:1 says, “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.” And here the Father not only identifies Jesus as his son but as his *beloved* son, the one in whom he delights—just as we see here in Isaiah 42:1. Moreover, just as God announced that he would put the Spirit on his beloved servant, so here the Father pours out the Spirit on his son, who descends on Jesus in the manner that a dove might descend to the earth.

Now, why does this matter? Well, the servant in Isaiah is eventually identified as the one who would die for the sins of his people (Is 52:13-53:12). Thus, the Father identifies not only Jesus as God the Son, but also his Messiah, the human king from David’s line. And he not only identifies him as the Messiah, but also as the suffering servant who would lay down his life for our sins. Thus, we can add from the testimony of the Father that Jesus is the God-man who lived for us, died for us, rose for us, and reigns as God’s now and forever king. But there’s more. We also see the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

The testimony of the Holy Spirit

Remember how I said that Mark seems to focus even more on Jesus' actions than his teaching? Well, we see a case of that in verses 12-13, as Mark writes, "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him." Mark doesn't tell us anything the devil or Jesus said in that temptation; just that the Spirit drove him into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil. So why do I say that the Spirit's action testifies to the identify of Jesus?

It's because you can't think of temptation without thinking of Adam and, with the reference to forty days in the wilderness, especially Israel. But Adam and Israel represent the same thing. Adam was God's son—a human who was made in his image and should have reflected and represented him in the world God created for him. We see all kinds of hints that this is who Adam is in Genesis, but Luke makes it explicit in Luke 3:38, identifying him as "the son of God." That was Adam's role, but he failed, succumbing to temptation.

Then God raised up a people in Israel, whom he referred to as his son. Remember how the Lord said to Moses, "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son'" (Exod 4:22-23)? Therefore, like Adam, Israel was to represent and reflect God in the land that he made for them. That's why God kept telling them that they must be holy as he is holy (e.g., Lev 11:44; 19:2). Yet, like Adam, they too succumbed to temptation.

Even Israel's king is to be God's son, his representative who reflects him over his kingdom, and that's why it's a tragedy that the kings of Israel are so utterly wicked. Even the best of them have their sins noted in 1 Samuel through 2 Kings. As every human who was to be as God's son, representing and reflecting him in the world, failed in the face of temptation, here is the Spirit driving another one to face the temptation of the devil as Adam and Israel failed before him.

And yet, unlike those who preceded him, Mark mentions nothing of Jesus' failure in the face of temptation. And that's because Jesus didn't fail. He did not sin, ever. And so by the Spirit driving Jesus to be tempted of the devil, he is showing us that Jesus is the true Son who perfectly represents and reflects his Father. And the reason this is crucial for us is because it is in our union with Jesus by faith that we are sons of God as well.

When we place our faith in Christ, what is true of our Lord becomes true of us as well. And if he's not the righteous, sinless son, then we would not get to be sons of God in him. But because he is, so we are. And as sons of God in Jesus, that means we are beloved by God, credited with the righteousness of Christ, and awaiting the day we get to be with our God forever as his children.

Mark opens this gospel making clear his intent. He wants to show us who Jesus is. And as he opens, he lines up his witnesses to show us that Jesus is nothing less than the God-man, God the Son incarnate, who lived, die, was raised, and reigns, awaiting the day he'll come to take us home

to be with him. So let's remember him and give thanks to him now as we come to the table.
Amen.