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**“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves  
and take up their cross and follow me.” Mark 8:34**

# Jesus, the Suffering Servant (Part 1)

**T**he four gospels are so important for our Christian faith that it is hard to imagine the church without them. Yet, there was a time when the church existed without these sacred writings. The earthly ministry of Jesus ended in about A.D. 30, and the Gospel According to Mark was probably written in the late 60's. Throughout those decades, the first generation of Christians had the living witness of those who had known Jesus. His sayings and teachings, stories of his miracles, his suffering, death, and resurrection were all told and retold and passed on within the community of disciples.

Before the gospels were written, the church was evangelizing, teaching, baptizing, celebrating Eucharist, serving the poor, and living the teachings of Jesus. Out of this lived experience as the community of Jesus' disciples, the gospels came to be written. The good news of Jesus formed the community of disciples, and this community of disciples formed the written gospels.

We can distinguish three stages in gospel formation. The first stage is the historical life and ministry of Jesus, his death and resurrection. This is the good news, the original living gospel. The second stage is the preaching of the apostles. As the Holy Spirit filled their lives, they were enabled to remember the life of Jesus and also to understand its meaning for themselves and others.

This Spirit gave them a burning desire to spread the message of Jesus as the good news of salvation for all. It led them to travel throughout the known world preaching and teaching what they had received. The final stage of formation is the writing of the evangelists. The gospel writers pulled together the collected memories about Jesus, the preaching of the apostles, and the interpretation and understanding of the church into four inspired works.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, each writer expressed the good news of Jesus in his own way. Each gospel was written in a different place in the ancient world, at a different time during the first century, and within the context of different cultures with diverse questions and needs. Each of the four gospels gives us a unique portrait of Jesus to enrich our understanding.

Two main factors led to the need for written gospels. First, the church was rapidly expanding throughout the Roman Empire. This expansion created the need to have some concrete and unchanging expression of the good news of Jesus to bring to each community. Second, the apostles were beginning to die, and the church no longer had their eye-witness testimony of the life of Jesus. The need to pull together the traditions of Jesus' words and deeds into a full picture of his ministry led the authors to create the written gospels.

The best evidence indicates that Mark was the first to shape the Christian message into this unique literary work called a gospel. In fact, Mark is the only New Testament book which calls itself a gospel: "The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). The later gospels of Matthew and Luke seem to have used Mark's gospel as their major source.

When Mark began to write the gospel, the church had already expanded throughout the empire and even to the city of Rome. The best theory about the origins of this gospel places the evangelist in Rome during the reign of Nero (A.D. 54–68). The beauty of that imperial city at the height of its power, its bright marble buildings and its forum filled with nobles and their servants, disguised the terrible suffering of its Christian community. Early sources credit Peter as the source of much of Mark's information and understanding. Mark is known as the "interpreter" or "translator" (*hermeneutes* in Greek) of Peter. When the city of Rome burned in A.D. 64, Nero blamed the Christians and unleashed a great persecution. Both Peter and Paul, along with hundreds of other Christians, died as martyrs during that time. Mark wrote his gospel in this atmosphere of persecution and great suffering, and perhaps it was Peter's death in Rome that spurred Mark to complete his gospel.

## Reflection and discussion

- In what sense can we say that Mark's gospel began the third stage in gospel formation?

- What were some of the circumstances that provoked Mark to write this gospel?

## A Gospel in a Time of Crisis

The particular portrait of Jesus formed by Mark's gospel responds to the unique situation and challenging questions of the Christian community in which the evangelist wrote. Who is Jesus? Why is he so powerfully attractive and so violently opposed? Why should I continue to follow him? If he has such power, why does he allow us to suffer? How do I follow him in such difficult situations? These were the kinds of questions asked by this persecuted community. These were the questions in Mark's mind as he remembered the deeds of Jesus and drew together his life to hand it on to others. Mark selected the particular parts of the tradition about Jesus that would help the church understand him better and follow him more faithfully.

Mark has written a fast-paced gospel filled with the actions of Jesus. It is the shortest of all the gospels and seems to be designed to create a sense of urgency. Jesus moves somewhat breathlessly from place to place, taking the lead and determining the direction of the narrative. Mark's gospel lacks many of the lengthy teachings that fill the other gospels. Whether or not Mark knew



**The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

Mark 1:1

# Preparing the Way of the Lord

## MARK 1:1–8

<sup>1</sup>*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

<sup>2</sup>*As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,*

*“See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;*

<sup>3</sup>*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:*

*‘Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.’”*

<sup>4</sup>*John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. <sup>5</sup>And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>6</sup>Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. <sup>7</sup>He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. <sup>8</sup>I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”*

The opening verse is a prologue for the gospel of Mark, serving as a lens through which the whole gospel will be viewed. It is the glad tidings about Jesus, who is the Christ (Messiah) and Son of God. The “beginning” of this good news is the prophetic preparation made by John the Baptist, followed by the baptism and testing of Jesus.

The coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both a continuation and a decisive new beginning of God’s saving plan. The opening quotations from the ancient Scriptures show that his coming has been prepared by God through the history of ancient Israel. Though attributed to Isaiah, the passage comes from several places in the law and the prophets of Israel. From Exodus 23:20, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you”; from Malachi 3:1, “I am sending my messenger to prepare the way”; and from Isaiah 40:3, “A voice cries out: In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.” For Mark, Jesus’ mission involves the fulfillment of God’s plan in history. Though the Scriptural verses originally referred to Israel, they now refer to Jesus as the embodiment of ancient Israel.

John the baptizer understood his ministry in the wilderness as a desire to fulfill this passage from Isaiah. The fact that the Qumran community lived in this area of the wilderness where John ministered and that the community understood its own mission as fulfilling Isaiah 40:3 has led to a great deal of credible speculation that John had been a member of this community for a time. John is the “messenger” sent to prepare “the way” of Jesus. As the last of Israel’s prophets, he stirred up the people, challenged them to look at their lives, and prepared their hearts for Jesus Christ.

John’s “baptism of repentance” prepares the way of the Lord, offering forgiveness of sins with a converted heart (verse 5). So attractive is John’s message and baptism, that the whole countryside and all Jerusalem come to him. The place of John’s ministry, the wilderness and the Jordan River, evokes God’s saving history with Israel. In the wilderness God prepared a people for the liberated life he would provide for them, and the Jordan River was the way through which God’s people entered the promised land. John’s baptism was a way for the Jews to reaffirm their identity as God’s people—to come to the wilderness once more and to reenter the land of God’s promise through the water.

John’s clothing and diet not only associate his life with the wilderness, but they accentuate his sparse simplicity and his single-minded focus on his pro-

phetic mission (verse 6). More specifically, his hairy garment and leather belt associate him with Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), and with the prophecy of Malachi that Elijah would return before the day of the Lord to bring a change of heart to God's people (Mal 4:5–6).

John's self-effacing proclamation specifies that the reason for his preaching and baptism is the announcement of the coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He first describes Jesus as "more powerful" than himself (verse 7). Jesus would have more divine authority and would play a greater role in God's redemptive plan for the world. Second, he places himself in the role of a servant, not even worthy to untie the thong of Jesus' sandals. And finally, he contrasts his own baptism with the greater baptism Jesus will bring.

The baptism of John is part of the old covenant with Israel and prepares God's people for the coming of the kingdom of God. The baptism Jesus brings will confer the Holy Spirit, evoking the scriptural promise that God would "pour out" his Spirit (Joel 2:28 [3:1]). Mark's readers would interpret these words in light of the Christian baptism they had received. This Christian baptism, like the baptism of John, used the form of immersion in water and was associated with repentance and the forgiveness of sins. But, unlike the baptism of John, Christian baptism initiated believers into the new age of God's grace, characterized by the unique blessings of the Spirit, promised by the prophets.

## Reflection and discussion

- One of the earliest designations of the Christian movement was "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:23). How does the beginning of Mark's gospel indicate that the ministry of Jesus would be a new Way?

- In what ways does the geography of these opening verses recall the history of God's relationship with ancient Israel?

- I, too, need to hear the message of forgiveness, to know that I can draw near to God. What can I do to turn away from all that could separate me from the life offered by Jesus?

- How can I, like John the Baptist, draw others to Jesus and help prepare them for a deeper relationship with him?

## Prayer

*Jesus, help me prepare the way for you. Come into my life today, and let me know that you are the Messiah and Son of God. Guide me with your Spirit as I encounter you through my study of this holy gospel.*