

Something Old, Something New

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[0 : 00] All right, so we are starting a new series. We started last week in the book of Mark, chapter 1, the gospel of Mark. If you have a Bible, physical, virtual, digital, I encourage you to open it up.

We're going to be looking at Mark, chapter 1. We got through all of one verse last week. We're going to get through a few more this week. Mark, chapter 1, taking a look at verses 2 through 8. And as you find your way to the gospel of Mark, let me ask you a question. That I encourage you to actually respond to. If you're watching online, you can respond in the chat. What are some of your favorite book or movie franchises, like series?

What are some of your favorites? Harry Potter. Star Wars, the best, my favorite. What else? Lord of the Rings. That's good.

And of course, you're probably a dear, deep lover of the Hobbit trilogy, right? Yeah, yeah. Not so much. Yeah, good. Yeah. Okay, so we like these kinds of stories.

[1 : 05] At least some of us do. A good chunk of our culture does because they tell these arcing, sweeping narratives over the course of years. And sometimes they change from generation to generation to generation.

And you get to know the characters and the stories. And you get to understand, like, why one particular moment is significant because of everything that happened before. We once had invited a group of friends.

We had, like, put out a Facebook status. Like, hey, we're going to go see Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part One. Come and join us. And we sat there. It was, like, opening night at the theater.

And a friend sat next to us. Like, the lights are going down. The title card is coming up. And the friend leans over and says, I haven't seen or read any of these. What? Can you give me a little backstory? Like, there are chapters and hundreds of pages of backstory.

How do you possibly summarize all this up in one moment? We were just having a conversation a couple nights ago about some friends were talking about a show that they were watching. And, like, this friend had gotten together with this friend.

[2 : 03] And, like, they're giving this whole backstory. And I'm like, I know that this is significant for you. But I have no clue what you're talking about. Because I didn't have all of the, in this case, it was a television show, like, the seasons and episodes of television to, like, get me into this.

Like, if you're watching Grey's Anatomy season 39, and then, like, McDreamy shows up on the screen, and you have no idea who Patrick Dempsey is, then you're like, what's the big deal? But you're like, no, it's McDreamy. You gotta know. So there's this question that Christians have been asking since the first century A.D. And that is, what are we supposed to do with this thing called the Old Testament?

The backstory to be all backstories. And you'll hear me use a couple different phrases for the Old Testament. Sometimes I'll call it the Old Testament. Sometimes I'll call it the Hebrew or Jewish scriptures. Sometimes John Goldengay, an Old Testament scholar, calls it the First Testament. Because, you know, even in the title Old Testament, it kind of gives, like, a certain sense of, like, how we treat it and respect it. Like, oh, yeah, it's that one that we don't really use anymore. Those other 39 books that, like, they're gory and they're scary and they're weird.

[3 : 11] And it's, you know, it's not the, like, the Jesus that we really, really like. So Christians have been asking this question for centuries. Like, if you're in the middle of, like, reconstructing, deconstructing your faith and figuring out, like, I really love Jesus and his way, but I don't know what to do about the First Testament, the old one.

And you're, you're sorry, but there's nothing new about that question. It's been around for a while. Now, there was a guy, he was actually a bishop, and his name was Marcion. And Marcion had this aha moment about what to do with the Old Testament, the Hebrew scripture.

And his idea was, in Jesus, we have the revelation of God, the highest God. But in the Old Testament, Marcion said, that was actually a different God called the Demiurge, who is an evil, wicked God, and Christians don't believe that one.

That's what Marcion said. Now, this might smack a little bit, if you're paying attention, of some, like, anti-Semitism, okay? Of, well, those Hebrews, those Jews, well, they were just worshiping the wrong God the whole time.

Jesus was the one who showed us the one true God, and everything that came before was bull. Marcion actually said something along the lines of, he wanted Christianity to be, quote, untrammled and undefiled by association with Judaism.

[4 : 33] Ew. It's just gross. Now, he was doing his best to make sense of this thing called the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures, but he swung in a direction that went way too far to say he was a completely different God.

Now, you'll hear me over the course of the many, many years that I get to preach to you say things about how Jesus does reveal God to us and shows us things about God that we did not know. But that's very, very different than saying that it was not God at all in the first place. Now, Marcion had a big problem with his theory, which was eventually called a heresy by the early church. And the big problem with his theory is that when you look at the first chapter of Mark, you read the beginning or the reign of the good news, the euangelion about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, this explosive sentence about the revolution that Jesus is carrying out, that is a political reality about what happens here on earth as it is in heaven.

Mark begins his gospel this way, the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah, the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures.

[5 : 51] Mark begins his story about Jesus by referencing what came before. And so today we're going to talk about what's old and what's new, and then what we have to do in response to what's old and what's new.

Mark begins his gospel, his biography about Jesus, by connecting it to everything that happened before Jesus. Because Jesus, even though he's doing a new thing, he is not completely changing course.

As N.T. Wright says, Jesus unexpectedly, surprisingly, in brand new ways, does exactly what God had always said he was going to do.

So we read, as it's written in Isaiah the prophet, the Hebrew Scriptures, quote, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.

So Mark begins his gospel by talking about this messenger that the prophets had said would come before the Messiah. And so we're going to talk a little bit about John the Baptist today.

[7 : 02] Now, Mark says he's quoting from Isaiah, but it would be very common for someone to say, I'm quoting from Isaiah, but they actually mashed together three different quotes.

And so in this quote that we have, I will send my messenger ahead, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, we actually get a quote from Malachi, the book of Exodus, and from Isaiah. So first, the book of Malachi, chapter 3.

Malachi, chapter 3, verse 1 says, Look, I am sending my messenger, who will clear or prepare the path before me. And to finish the quote, Then suddenly the Lord Yahweh, whom you are seeking, will come to his temple.

In other words, Mark is drawing to mind, bringing to mind this prophecy that God is going to send a messenger, send someone to be the spokesperson for God, and then God would show up at the temple.

And this was part of the expectation of Israel. Israel, as you'll remember, they had been called out of Egypt. They had been made into a nation. David and Solomon built a temple for Yahweh God.

[8 : 13] And then eventually the nation was split in two. The northern half was exiled by the Assyrians. The southern half had been exiled by the Babylonians and the temple had been destroyed.

Then Cyrus comes along from the Persian Empire, allows the Jews to go back, rebuild the temple. Now, if you track biblical history, there's the scene of every time that the Jews build like a tabernacle or a temple, they build a tabernacle and the glory of the Lord fills it. And then Solomon builds a temple and the glory of the Lord fills it. And then after the exile, they build a temple and nothing happens. In fact, the scriptures say that the people wept because the temple, the glory of the temple was nothing like the one that had come before. And so Israel is still waiting for the exile to end, for God to return to his people. And that's what Malachi is prophesying about. Malachi says, look, I'm going to send my messenger and then God is going to show up on the scene.

And again, this has implications for what Mark is trying to say about who Jesus is. Now, Malachi, Malachi is actually doing his own quoting. So Malachi is looking back at Exodus chapter 23, which is about God and Israel at Mount Sinai.

[9 : 30] Think Ten Commandments, Prince of Egypt, ABC Easter special. God is there carving into tablets of stone and he has his very own presence. And God says, I'm about to send a messenger or an angel in front of you to guard you on your way and to bring you to a place that I've made ready.

So as Malachi is saying, get ready, Israel. The exile may not be over yet, but God is going to show up just like he showed up at Mount Sinai, just like he showed up at the Red Sea, just like he showed up when he crossed over the Jordan and entered the promised land.

God is going to show up again. So that's what Mark is quoting. And he finishes the quote from actually quoting Isaiah chapter 40. And it says this, it says, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for Yahweh.

Make straight a highway. This makes straight in the desert, a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up. Every mountain shall become level and the rugged places become a plain.

And the glory of Yahweh, that glory that did not return to the temple, the glory of Yahweh will be revealed. And all people, not just the Jews, not just the Israelites, all people will see it together.

[10 : 41] And just a few verses later, in verse nine, Isaiah 40, verse nine, it's the verses that we took a look at last week. Tell the good news, oh messenger, here is your God.

So Mark begins his gospel, the beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the son of God, as it's written in Isaiah and Malachi and Exodus. I'm going to send a messenger ahead of you, a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Now in Malachi's day and in Exodus's day and in Isaiah's day and in Mark's day, when people said, prepare the way for the Lord, they weren't thinking about Jesus because Jesus hadn't shown up on the scene yet.

They were thinking about Yahweh God, the God, God's self would show up on the scene. So Mark continues verse four. So John, the Baptist appears in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

So we talked about something old. And what I want you to remember is that Jesus, without the old Testament, without the Hebrew scriptures, without the prophecies and the buildup to this point in the story, Jesus is unintelligible without the old Testament.

[11 : 56] Now we can do a lot of things about like his moral teaching and his ethical teaching. We can talk about death and resurrection and all of those things, but all of that is a climax to a story that starts in Genesis.

And when we lop that off and we say, we don't need that anymore. In fact, it's about a different God, even as Marcion said, then we are disconnecting Jesus from the story that he is the climax to.

It's like jumping in partway through your favorite cinematic universe and saying, well, I hope you understand all these references. They probably will go over your head. It's like sitting down in the middle of Deathly Hallows, part one and saying like, yeah, we don't need anything that happens before.

No, of course you do. When Jesus shows up on the scene, he is finishing a story already in progress. So something old, something new, just because there's continuity with what came before doesn't mean that something new isn't happening.

So John the Baptist appears in the wilderness and he's preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In some of the first stories that you'll read about, like horseless carriages, you know, the thing that we call cars now, you'll hear these stories about some of the original inventors, like calling banks for investment.

[13:17] And the banks would reject them because they say, well, that's just a fad. There's no way that these horseless carriages are going to go anywhere. Why would you possibly need to replace the horse?

It's done us good for centuries. Cars are just doing the same thing and they're more expensive and they require fuel and they have all these fumes and it's just not worth it. A horse is a lot easier to care for.

And we can obviously see how wrong they were. Yeah, true. Cars were horseless carriages. They were just doing the same thing and yet they took over the world.

There is a continuity with what came before, yet a discontinuity that makes a new world. And so we'll see this in John the Baptist and in Jesus. John the Baptist appears in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin.

So here's some of the continuity and discontinuity. Number one is wilderness. John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. This is the key crucial word for Israelites, for Jews, because some of the coolest stories in the Old Testament happened in the wilderness.

[14:23] The wilderness, we hear that word and think, I don't want to go there. No, thank you. But the wilderness is where God did some of his best work with God's people. It's where God shows up at Sinai and it's where God splits the Red Sea and it's where Elijah meets God in the wilderness.

It's where God often reveals God's character in the wilderness. And so there was this expectation with that when God showed up on the scene, filled the temple with glory again and made the world new, it would begin in the wilderness and then spread to the rest of creation.

So John the Baptist shows up in the wilderness and there's a little bit of hope and expectation.

Could this be the beginning of what we had hoped for, what we had expected? Like I had mentioned last week, many messiahs had shown up previously and they would begin their ministries in the wilderness.

During the time of John the Baptist and Jesus, there was a community in the case of Qumran, the Essenes, and they believed that they were the ones who were going to spark the beginning of the new age.

And so they camped in the wilderness. And that's where John begins his ministry. But he's doing something new there. He's baptizing people.

[15:36] Now again, baptism, not a new concept for the Jews. Baptism was one of the ways that a Gentile, a non-Jewish person, would make the change from a non-Yahweh worshiper to a Yahweh worshiper.

And so the Jews would say, okay, Gentile, you want to become one of us by circumcision, by taking on the kosher laws, by following the Torah. And in order to show that you are being reborn into a new family of Abraham, you are going to be baptized into these waters.

Now, John the Baptist is doing something particularly scandalous, is that he's also baptizing people, but he's not doing it to the Gentiles. He's saying, hey, fellow Israelites, you too need to be baptized into the new thing that God is doing.

And if you look in other Gospels, you will see the scandal that this creates because people would go to John and say, we are already children of Abraham. We don't need this baptism. And John the Baptist says, whatever, children of Abraham.

God can make children of Abraham out of these stones, but the heart, the soul, is what is being transformed in baptism. So John the Baptist, he's in the wilderness and he's preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

[16:59] And the whole Judean countryside, verse 5, and all the people of Jerusalem, a little bit of hyperbole there, went out to him and confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the river Jordan.

Which again, there's a huge amount of imagery happening here because the river Jordan is when Israel had crossed over from the non-promised land into the promised land. And John the Baptist is reenacting this history for their day.

Verse 6, John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist and he ate locusts and wild honey. Now this is a weird detail to put in the middle of the story, but again, it's that something old, something new because this is actually quoting 2 Kings chapter 1, which is describing Elijah the prophet.

It uses the exact same phrase that Elijah the prophet, describe him to me, the king says, and Elijah is described as one wearing clothing made of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist. In the book of Malachi, which we've already talked about, Malachi says, look, I am going to send Elijah the prophet to you before the great and terrifying day of the Lord arrives. And don't worry, we'll talk about that whole great and terrifying day of the Lord and what that means in Jesus. [18:19] But again, we see this discontinuity and continuity that there's something old happening, that there's wilderness and there's water and there's the River Jordan and all of this stuff that happened before, it seems to be happening again, but in new, unexpected ways that create scandal and that create a sense of expectation and offense and purpose because some people are coming out and some people refuse to be a part of it.

That's what John's ministry is. Now, in our day, it can be tempting to reduce Jesus down to a nice, moral teacher.

To reduce Jesus down to merely someone that we can apply our own ethics and morals onto because, well, I'm a nice person and Jesus is a nice person, so we must believe the same thing. And we then kind of downplay the more scandalous claims about Jesus. He's a nice, moral person, but that whole resurrection from the dead thing, that's pretty ludicrous.

Well, that whole, like, being God in the flesh thing, obviously no one believes that, right? And you can claim or believe that if you want to, but that's not what Mark is writing or talking about.

[19:39] It's insulting what John proclaimed and what Mark was writing about because the only reason why John would be doing the things that he's doing and the only reason why Mark would be writing the things that he's writing is that he's saying before the day of the Lord arrives, there's going to be a messenger.

That's John. And when that messenger arrives, he's going to be proclaiming that God in the flesh is showing up, which is making a claim about who Jesus is.

So John is using all of this symbolism available to him, the good Jew that he is about water and baptism and wilderness and being a prophet in the style of Elijah and saying, yeah, it means what you think it means, that I think God is about to show up.

Now, what is John's message? He's appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In verse 7, his message is, after me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I'm baptizing you with water, but he's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit, which by the way, fun fact about the book of Mark. Book of Mark, you read it in one of your Bible translations. Everything's in like this kind of storytelling past tense.

[20:59] John the Baptist appeared, then he said, at that time Jesus came. But in the Greek, it's in this like present tense, the storytelling present tense. So it makes it like kind of more interesting to read, like when you're with your friends and you're telling a story, and then he goes into the store and like all the lights shut off, and then he grabs the bread, like that kind of storytelling.

That's what's happening in the Mark. So John the Baptist appears and he's preaching a baptism of repentance and the whole GDN countryside is coming out to meet him and they're confessing their sins and they're being baptized.

It's all like this right now kind of action. And then this is my, John's message. After me is coming the one more powerful than I. I'm baptizing you with water, but he's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit, which again, John is referencing Old Testament prophecies from the book of Joel about God pouring out his spirit on all people.

I got the water part. The one who's coming after me has got the spirit part. Get ready. John's message was about a change of direction. So we talked about something old. We talked about something new.

Now we're talking about something meta noiu. It's a good word. The Greek word for repentance. Now, modern day, we think of the word repentance as this very negative thing, right?

[22:12] People standing in front of the White House repent, turn or burn sort of idea. But in John's day, meta noia, to change your mind, was not that negative of a word.

It was just what you did when you decided that you needed a new change of direction. Repent in our day. It's a little bit preachy. It's a little bit Christianese.

But I should remind us all that we like it when people repent. As we talked about a couple weeks ago with the whole idea of like reproduction and evangelizing.

We like it when people change their minds to believe what we believe, of course. We like it when people move from a direction that we believe is causing harm to a direction that is not causing harm.

And we hear the word repent and we think of it as a very individualistic thing. But notice that in this passage, it's not about individuals, it's about the whole people, the whole Judean countryside, the people of Jerusalem.

[23 : 10] It's about a collective, a community, a society that's changing direction. As a for instance, gay marriage, the right of LGBTQ people to receive the benefits of marriage, moved from being allowed in one state to all 50 states from 2004 to 2015.

And there was this excellent study that showed that when the country repented, changed their mind, changed the direction that the society was going in from banning, allowing people to be married, to allowing them to be married.

134,000 fewer teenagers per year were committing suicide. 134,000 fewer people per year, teenagers per year, were committing suicide because there was this sense of there can be hope for the future, which gives me a sense of hope for today.

And this is something we're celebrating because the nation repented, changed their minds, changed their direction to go in a new way. And because of that repentance, the biblical word for it, fewer people were taking their lives, fewer teenagers were taking their lives.

Repentance is a good and necessary thing. And it's not only about individual action, though that's part of it, but it's also about the collective, the society. And so when John the Baptist is saying, repent, he's calling for a nation, a people, who change direction so they can be ready for the new thing that God is about to do.

[24 : 50] We think of forgiveness of sins as an individualistic thing. Repent for the forgiveness of sins, which basically we take to mean as repent so you can get God to like you again, if he ever did in the first place.

But that's not how forgiveness of sins is used in the Old Testament. Forgiveness of sins was a phrase that was always used about the restoration of the nation, the restoration of the people, about things being set right again.

We see this in the book of Jeremiah that God calls for the forgiveness that calls for his people to come back to him so that all of the nation can be rebuilt, their glory found again.

This is the forgiveness of sins. We think of forgiveness of sins as a, well, now you can go to heaven when you die and now God can stand to be around you thing.

But for the prophets, forgiveness of sins was about a nation being brought out of exile, about a people being brought back to a place of dignity.

[25 : 52] So John says, repent, make a change in direction to the new thing that God is about to do, to the God in the flesh that is about to arrive and set all things right and then the thing that the prophets have promised will finally happen, the forgiveness of sins, meaning the restoration of all things.

But here's the thing about repentance and forgiveness. Grace has very little effect on those who feel they have no need of it. Grace has very little effect on those who feel they have no need of it. And this is why the church through the centuries and the millennia has not really given up on this message of repentance. Now, if you've been around the table church for a while, past 18 months, I hope that you can trust me enough to know that I believe first and foremost that God created you good.

This is Genesis chapter 1, that you are created in the image of God, that God delights over your personhood, that God loves you, that God is never going to abandon you because of your actions, that God sticks with you, and that we don't have to convince God or trick God or have somebody die for our sakes to get God to like us.

I hope that you can trust me on that. I also hope that you can understand that we all have places where we are broken, where we've made mistakes, where we've harmed ourselves or others or our world.

[27 : 27] that's what we're talking about when we talk about those churchy Christian words like sin and repentance, the admission that we need grace, the admission that we are not who we were all made to be, that we all carry the wounds and the scars and the traumas of the harm done upon us, the harm we've done to ourselves, the harm that we've done to others.

So when we preach about repentance and the forgiveness of sins, I know that can maybe trigger you in some way that this is just the same old Christianity that's here to tell you about how wrong and evil you are.

No. The truth is that God made you good, that God made you in God's image, and that image is one of love and that God is for us, that God cannot be against us.

And because of that love, because of who God made us to be, we owe it to ourselves and to those around us to be honest about the healing that we need. Grace has very little effect on those who feel they have no need of it.

And all God desires to do is to lavish us, to pour out his grace upon us, the grace of forgiveness, the grace of healing, the grace of growth, to be the human beings that God intended us to be.

[28 : 49] But if we forever say, I have no need, then we keep ourselves in the grace that God wants from us. So, in these few verses, we see that God is doing a new thing, a thing that has implications on the ground for planet Earth, for our nations and our neighborhoods and our communities and our families and our lives.

that God takes the old and brings it to a conclusion in Jesus and that we owe it to ourselves become students of the whole Bible, not just the parts that we like, but the whole story so that we can come in on Deathly Hallows Part 1 and not have to lean over and say, what's he talking about? So we can understand that when Jesus talks about kingdom and forgiveness and repentance, he's not creating new words on the spot. He's concluding the story that's been going on long before and that we get to play a role in helping it finish.

And that when we talk about Jesus, we're not talking about just a nice moral teacher, but at least who the first Christians believed that was God, God's self, returned to Earth to set all things right.

And that if we want to experience the grace of God, we have to begin as individuals and as a society to say we're in need of it in the first place.