

'The Beginning of the Gospel'- Mar 1:1

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon explores the significance of Mark's Gospel as the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, emphasizing its prophetic roots and the portrayal of Jesus as the Servant of God.

Scripture: Mark 1:1

Topics: "The Gospel of Jesus Christ", "The Servant of God"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the Gospel of Mark, emphasizing its brevity and directness as it presents the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He highlights that Mark's account is influenced by Peter and serves as a vivid introduction to the Gospel narrative, focusing on the theme of Jesus as the Servant of God. Morgan notes that the Gospel is fundamentally good news, centered on Christ, and reveals how the prophecies of Isaiah are fulfilled in Jesus' life. He encourages the congregation to observe Jesus' actions and teachings as the key to understanding the Gospel's message. The sermon underscores the importance of recognizing the Gospel as a message of hope and salvation.

Transcript

Mar 1:1-3.

THE Gospel according to Mark is the briefest of the four. In all likelihood it was the earliest written. It was written probably before the death of Paul, but not later than the destruction of Jerusalem. Irenaeus definitely said that it was written after the deaths of Paul and Peter, but more recent investigation would place it earlier, that is before 63 A. D.

Patristic testimony agrees that it was influenced by Peter, that indeed it is the record of the facts concerning Jesus as they were told by Peter in his preaching, and recorded by his friend, Mark. This view is strengthened by modern scholarship.

Mark gives us practically no material other than that which is recorded by Matthew. The difference between the Gospels is that of method, rather than that of matter. The method of Mark is characterized, by directness and brevity (almost amounting to bluntness), accompanied by certain circumstantial touches which give us a most vivid sense of the Lord, in many details of look, gesture, and habits of speech.

The history of the writer of this Gospel as it may be traced in the New Testament, is a most interesting one. His Jewish name was John, Mark being his Latin surname. His mother, as Luke informs us in the

book of Act 12:12, was a woman of wealth, living in Jerusalem, evidently a personal friend of Peter, and hostess of the Christian disciples in the early days after Pentecost. By a reference, in the first letter of Peter, we may surmise that Mark was spiritually a son of Peter (1Pe 5:13), that he was brought to a knowledge of the Lord Christ savingly under the ministry of the 'great apostle. He was also a cousin of Barnabas. The first appearance of Mark in New Testament history is found in the story of the journey of Paul and Barnabas from Jerusalem to Antioch, upon which journey he accompanied them. He then went with them on the first missionary journey, suddenly leaving them at Perga. Why he left them, we do not know. It is an interesting fact that almost all expositors assume that he was afraid of the campaign, and went home, but there is no shadow of evidence that fear was the reason for his return. Certainly later on, discussion and separation occurred between Paul and Barnabas upon this very subject, for when starting upon another journey, Barnabas desired to take Mark with him, and Paul objected, because Mark had "gone back." That may be the reason why it is supposed that Mark turned back from fear. But, though Paul refused to take him, Barnabas desired to do so; and it is quite as possible that Barnabas was right, as Paul. So we may give Mark the benefit of the doubt. It is certain that he went with Barnabas to Cyprus, and subsequently was with Paul in Rome, a "fellow labourer,

The general consensus of opinion leads to the conclusion that the narrative was written by Mark in Rome, and was intended primarily for Gentiles. It is interesting to remember that there are no references to the Jewish law in this Gospel; that there are only two quotations from the ancient Scriptures, one of which is in this brief introduction; and that he constantly explains peculiarly Jewish terms and customs, which it would not be at all necessary to do to Jewish people. That however is a purely incidental matter, and in no way affects the presentation of the Lord which the narrative makes.

Bernard in his Bampton Lectures in 1864 entitled

"It is the Gospel of action, rapid, vigorous, vivid. Entering at once on the Lord's official and public career, it bears us on from one mighty deed to another with a peculiar swiftness of movement, and yet with the life of picturesque detail. Power over the visible and invisible worlds, especially as shown in the casting out of devils, is the prominent characteristic of the picture. St. Peter's saying to Cornelius has been well noticed as a fit motto for this Gospel.

Thus while Matthew presents us with the picture of the Messiah as King in 'all the royalty of His Person, the dignity of His office, and the grace of His mission; Mark gives us the picture of the Messiah as Servant, divested of all official dignity, save that of consecration to His work.

Our first meditation is concerned with the brief paragraph contained in the first three verses of chapter one.

With regard to the study of this Gospel I propose a perfectly free method; that is, I shall break through the trammels of chapters, verses, paragraphs, and punctuations as found in our versions.

This paragraph is the key to the whole Gospel, and therefore we must pause with it. It is complete within itself. The narrative proper of Mark begins with the fourth verse, with the words, "John came." The story begins with the appearing of John. I should say after careful reading, that probably the last thing Mark wrote was the opening paragraph. After he had finished his story, that vivid wonderful story in which we become almost breathless sometimes as we follow our Lord on the swiftness of the path of His earthly mission, Mark went back to write a title or preface, and in this preface we find the key of all that is to follow:

"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God, even as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.

Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face Who shall prepare Thy way. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight."

Mark first declared that he had written a "beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God as it is written in Isaiah the prophet." He then immediately wrote an exclamatory quotation, not from Isaiah, but from the last of the Hebrew prophets, Malachi.

"Behold, I send My messenger before Thy face who shall prepare Thy way." Having done so, he quoted from the prophecy of Isaiah at the point in the prophecy where the Gospel began: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make ye ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight."

Let us turn back to Malachi, in order to see the setting of the exclamatory quotation: "Behold, I send My messenger, and he shall prepare the way before Me." In the prophecy the words run on thus: "And the Lord, Whom ye seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, whom ye desire behold, he cometh, saith Jehovah of Hosts." In this prophetic word reference was made to two messengers, the Messenger of the covenant, and the messenger who precedes the Messenger of the covenant. Mark only quotes the words concerning the messenger who was to foretell the coming of the Messenger of the covenant.

He then went back to his starting point: "the Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God, even as it is written in Isaiah," and quoted from the prologue of the second part of Isaiah:

"The voice of one that crieth, Prepare ye in the wilderness the way of Jehovah, make level in the desert a highway for our God. . . . O thou that tellest the Gospel, good tidings to Zion . . . O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem" (Isa 40:3 and Isa 40:9).

To read Isaiah from the fortieth chapter to the end of the prophecy is to discover the Servant of God; it is an unveiling of the suffering Servant of God; while yet the same Servant of God is seen ultimately in triumph, a triumph won out of travail. This book then gives an account of the beginning of that Gospel, which according to Mark, was written in Isaiah.

We have said that Peter was in all probability the source from whom Mark derived his information. In his first letter (1Pe 1:24-25), he quoted from Isaiah, and from the same passage:

"All flesh is as grass,

And all the glory thereof as the flower of grass.

The grass withereth, and the flower falleth:

But the word of the Lord abideth forever."

He then went on to say, "And this is the word of the Gospel which was preached unto you."

Here then, we are admitted to the spirit of this Gospel of Mark. It is the Beginning, the starting point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as it is written in the prophet Isaiah. The paragraph is an inclusive introduction to all that is to follow. The word "Beginning" refers, not to the paragraph, not to the ministry of John, not to the ministry of Jesus. It refers to the Gospel. In this book we have the story of the beginning of

the whole Gospel. Here Mark has written the story of how the Gospel which Isaiah predicted became historic. Light is flung upon this matter, by the way in which Luke commenced his second treatise. "The former treatise I made, O Theophilus, concerning all that Jesus began both to do and to teach." That former treatise was also the story of a beginning; so that the Gospel according to Luke is also the account of the beginning of the Gospel.

The reference to Isaiah admits us to the spirit of all that is to follow, and so constitutes the key to its spiritual interpretation. What Isaiah predicted, Jesus fulfilled. Isaiah foresaw that the way of comfort was the way of the coming of Jehovah in His suffering and victorious Servant, to deal with sin and bring in righteousness. Here then is the story of how that Gospel became a fact in human history.

It is sufficient therefore now for us to notice, as the completion of this initial study; first, the supreme subject referred to; and secondly, the special theme of the book.

The supreme subject is "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." What does the word "Gospel" mean? In many senses there can be no better translation of the Greek word than that of which we constantly make use, the Evangel. What is an evangel? Dr. Maclear says that in classical Greek the word first meant a reward given to the bearers of good news; that it subsequently came to mean the sacrifice offered in thankfulness for good news; until finally it was used of the good news itself.

This last is the invariable New Testament sense. The Gospel is in itself a message of salvation, a message of comfort, a message of hope, a message of joy; a message that should always thrill to the tireless music of a psalm, a message that has nothing to do with denunciation. The Gospel is not preached when sin is denounced. The Gospel is good news to sinning men z a message of salvation from sin.

The word does not occur very often in the Gospel itself, but the occurrences illuminate the theme. After this opening paragraph it is almost immediately found twice. Mark tells us that when Jesus began His preaching in Galilee, He began to preach "the Gospel of God," the good news from God. Mark alone tells us that when Jesus began to preach, He not only said, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand"; but that He also said, "and believe in the Gospel." The word is not found again until after Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi, when Mark alone tells us that Jesus called His disciples to deny themselves and take up the Cross for His sake, and for the sake of the Gospel. Soon after, in those shadowed days while He was instructing these men, approaching the Cross, He used that same phrase a second time, "for My sake and the Gospel's" There is one beautiful incidental use of it, when the disciples, misunderstanding the prodigality of the love of the woman who anointed Jesus with ointment, He said, "Wheresoever the Gospel shall be preached . . . that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of for a memorial of her." Only once more it occurs, in the final chapter, as He appointed His disciples, to "go . . . and preach the Gospel to all the cosmos." There is always music in the word, hope in it, comfort in it, gladness in it; it is a veritable song to cheer the heart, and renew the courage; the Gospel, good news.

In this opening word, "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," everything is gathered up. By these words we are at once reminded, as we commence to study this book that the centre and circumference of the Gospel is Christ Himself; for whatever may be the harmonies of the varied notes of the infinite music, they are all homed and centered in Him. Not carelessly does this writer name Him at the commencement by the Old Testament word, Jesus. That is the name that places Him upon the level of my comprehension; for in the Man Who bore the name we find the point of contact between ourselves, and the One Whom He

supremely came to reveal. Take Him away from me, and remind me merely of the administrative power of God in His universe, and I am lost, for I cannot grasp the unfathomable truth. Take Him away from me, and speak to my soul of God in all the wonder and mystery of His being, and He is utterly incomprehensible to me. A gospel that is a Gospel of God, but is not spelt out into my language and rendered observable by my finite nature, becomes no Gospel to me. Mark commences where God began to fulfill the prophecy of His servants. The charm of this Gospel is that through it we shall be following Jesus, walking with Him, watching His gestures, listening to the very habits of His speech.

In the title "Christ," Mark suggests the way by which God administers that salvation, the proclamation of which is good news. Christ is the Messiah, the anointed One. The name Jesus brings us into the presence of the Galilean peasant. But Messiah, the anointed One, brings us into the presence of One upon Whom the holy chrism rests, the chrism of the Holy Spirit; enduing Him for service; and empowering Him for dying, for it was through the eternal Spirit that He offered Himself.

The ultimate phrase of the great description, "Son of God," suggests the infinitude of His power, reminding us that whereas men lay the hand of flesh imaginatively upon the hand of His flesh, they will yet be conscious of the thrilling power of essential Deity when His hand closes upon theirs; reminding us that men may look into human eyes, capable of human tears, the gleams of human laughter, and the tragedy of human sorrow; and yet see shining through them the light of essential Deity. Jesus, the anointed One, Son of God. It is the Gospel of One, sent, anointed of the Spirit, of the very nature of the Father. What He says is the Gospel. What He does is the Gospel.

Recently I came across some striking words from the pen of Mazzini:

"He came. The soul the most full of love, the most sacredly virtuous, the most deeply inspired by God and the future that men have yet seen on earth-Jesus. He bent over the corpse of the dead world, and whispered a word of faith. Over the clay that had lost all of man, but the movement and the form, He uttered words until then unknown: Love, Sacrifice, a heavenly origin. And the dead arose, a new life circulated through the clay, which philosophy had tried in vain to reanimate. From that corpse arose the Christian world, the world of liberty and equality. From that clay arose the true Man, the image of God, the precursor of humanity."

The Gospel is the good news of Jesus, the Anointed, Son of God. Alas that men sometimes proclaim it, as though there were no music in it! It is the music of all music; the inspiration of all music that is worthy the name: The Gospel!

That emphasizes the special theme of the book. We shall not look for, neither shall we find, the philosophy of the Gospel. We shall not discover here the explanation of the Divine operation by which the Gospel became possible. The full content of the Gospel, and its final application, are not here, save by implication. This is the beginning. Isaiah predicted the Gospel, and there was no prophecy of the ancient time with which these Hebrews were more familiar than his. Paul proclaimed it, and probably Mark knew that. It is almost certain that this book was written in Rome. Then think of this fact that Paul sent to Rome a letter, constituting the philosophy and explanation of the Gospel. Therein he wrote, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth ... for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith." He then went on to explain the Gospel; and the probability is that Mark had read that letter before he wrote this Gospel. He came to Rome, was there with Paul; and Paul's letter was there before Paul ever reached Rome. So that when Mark had written out Peter's story,

he prefaced it with a statement of how the Gospel began, which Isaiah predicted, of which Peter told the story, and which Paul explained in his book. This is how the prediction was fulfilled in history, how the Gospel came to be.

Our purpose in studying this Gospel is to watch the Servant of Jehovah, Jesus Christ the Son of God; to watch Him, rather than the people about Him; to observe Him as He is revealed here in the workings of His mind, and His attitude toward those who came into contact with Him.

Matthew wrote of the King, and of His method for establishing the Kingdom. Luke wrote of the perfect Man, and the universality of His Saviourhood. John wrote of the hidden mystery of His Being. Or again Matthew wrote of the Christ, Luke of Jesus, John of the Son of God. Mark here portrays that One Who is at once Jesus and Messiah and Son of God, as the Servant of God creating the Gospel. As we consider Him we shall know the Gospel.

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