
Contents

CHAPTER	PAGE
Preface	vii
Introduction to Mark	1
1. The Herald of the New King (Mark 1:1–8)	11
2. The Significance of Jesus' Baptism (Mark 1:9–11)	27
3. The Authority of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:12–20)	39
4. The Authority of the Divine King (Mark 1:21–28)	55
5. Kingdom Power (Mark 1:29–39)	69
6. The Lord and the Leper (Mark 1:40–45)	83
7. Jesus' Authority to Forgive Sin (Mark 2:1–12)	95
8. The Scandal of Grace (Mark 2:13–17)	109
9. The Exclusive Distinctiveness of the Gospel (Mark 2:18–22)	123
10. The Lord of the Sabbath—Part 1 (Mark 2:23–28)	135
11. The Lord of the Sabbath—Part 2 (Mark 3:1–6)	147
12. Mark's Sweeping Summary of Jesus' Ministry (Mark 3:7–19)	159
13. Jesus Christ: Liar, Lunatic, or Lord? (Mark 3:20–35)	173
14. Of Soils and Souls (Mark 4:1–20)	189

15.	Fruitful Hearers (Mark 4:21–34)	209
16.	Calming the Storm (Mark 4:35–41)	223
17.	Dominating Powers (Mark 5:1–20)	237
18.	The Power and Pity of Jesus (Mark 5:21–43)	251
19.	Amazing Unbelief (Mark 6:1–6)	269
20.	Ordinary Men, Extraordinary Calling (Mark 6:7–13)	283
21.	The Murder of the Greatest Prophet (Mark 6:14–29)	297
22.	The Creator Provides (Mark 6:30–44)	311
23.	Jesus Walks on Water (Mark 6:45–56)	323
24.	Scripture-Twisting Tradition (Mark 7:1–13)	337
25.	The Inside Story on Defilement (Mark 7:14–23)	349
26.	Food from the Master's Table (Mark 7:24–30)	361
27.	To Speak or Not to Speak (Mark 7:31–37)	373
28.	The Compassionate Provider (Mark 8:1–10)	383
29.	Spiritual Blindness (Mark 8:11–26)	395
30.	The Ultimate Good News and Bad News (Mark 8:27–33)	411
31.	Losing Your Life to Save It (Mark 8:34–38)	423
	Bibliography	435
	Index of Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek Words	437
	Index of Scripture	439
	Index of Subjects	452

The Herald of the New King (Mark 1:1–8)

1

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: “Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.’” John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (1:1–8)

No narrative is more compelling, and no message more essential, than the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the greatest story ever told because it

centers on the greatest person to ever walk this earth. The history of His earthly ministry is perfectly recorded in four complementary accounts—written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Their writings, known collectively as the four Gospels, provide a factual record of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Matthew and John were apostolic eyewitnesses to the events of which they wrote; Luke thoroughly investigated the details of our Lord’s ministry in order to produce his testimony (cf. Luke 1:3–4); and, according to early church tradition, Mark wrote his gospel based on the preaching of the apostle Peter. Though penned by different men, these four accounts harmonize perfectly, providing their readers with a full-orbed understanding of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. (For an integrated harmony of the Gospels, see John MacArthur, *One Perfect Life* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012].) Of the four gospel writers, only Mark used the word **gospel** (*euangelion*) to introduce his history of the Lord Jesus. In keeping with his quick, staccato style, Mark opens his account with one brief introductory phrase: **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**

The word **gospel** is a familiar one to us—frequently used to designate the first four books of the New Testament. But that is not how the biblical writers employed the term, nor is it how Mark uses it in the opening verse of his historical account. In the New Testament, the **gospel** is never a reference to a book; rather, it always refers to the message of salvation. That is Mark’s intended meaning here. His first-century audience would have understood the word “gospel” to mean “good news” or “glad tidings” of salvation. But it had an even more specific meaning that would have been familiar to both Jewish and Gentile people in ancient times.

First-century Jews would have been familiar with the word *euangelion* from its occurrence in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. There it is used to speak of military victory, political triumph, or physical rescue (cf. 1 Sam. 31:9; 2 Sam. 4:10; 18:20–27; 2 Kings 7:9; Ps. 40:9). Significantly, the term is also found in a messianic context, where it points to the ultimate salvation of God’s people through the messianic King. Speaking of Israel’s future deliverance, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed:

Get yourself up on a high mountain,
O Zion, bearer of good news,
Lift up your voice mightily,
O Jerusalem, bearer of good news;
Lift it up, do not fear.
Say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”
Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him.
(Isa. 40:9–10)

In those verses, the Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for “good news” (*basar*) with forms of the Greek word *euangelion*. In Isaiah 40, this “good news” consisted of more than mere tidings of military victory or physical rescue. It encompassed a message of ultimate victory, triumph, and eternal rescue, making it the best news possible. After thirty-nine chapters of judgment and rebuke, Isaiah concluded his prophetic masterpiece (in chapters 40–66) with promises of hope and deliverance. Those promises proclaimed the reality of God’s future reign and the restoration of His people.

In Isaiah 52:7, we find another familiar proclamation of hope:

How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace
And brings good news of happiness,
Who announces salvation,
And says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

As in Isaiah 40:9, the prophet used the Hebrew term *basar* or “good news” (cf. Isa. 61:1–2), which is again translated by *euangelion* in the Septuagint. Significantly, this passage precedes Isaiah’s extended discussion of the Suffering Servant—the Messiah through whom this promised salvation would come (Isa. 52:13–53:12). When Mark stated that this was the **gospel of Jesus Christ**, his use of the word *Christos* (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Messiah”) would have made this connection inescapable in the minds of those familiar with the Septuagint. The word **gospel**, which was associated with the Messiah, was a word of enthronement and royal exaltation; the glorious tidings of the

King of kings coming to take His rightful throne.

The term *euangelion* also had special significance to those outside of Judaism. Though largely ignorant of Jewish history, first-century Romans would have similarly understood the term to refer to the good tidings of a coming king. A Roman inscription dating back to 9 B.C. provides insight into how the word **gospel** was understood in an ancient Gentile context. Speaking of the birth of Caesar Augustus, a portion of the inscription reads:

Whereas the Providence . . . which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending him, as it were, [as] a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere . . . and whereas the birthday of the God [Augustus] was the beginning of the world of the glad tidings that have come to men through him. . . . (*Inscrip. Priene*, cited from Gene L. Gree, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002] 94)

The inscription speaks of “glad tidings” (a form of *euangelion*) to describe the birth and reign of Caesar Augustus—a ruler whom the Romans regarded as their divine deliverer. The word **gospel** thus functioned as a technical term, even in secular society, to refer to the arrival, ascendancy, and triumph of an emperor.

As these examples from both Jewish and pagan sources illustrate, the first-century readers of Mark’s account would have understood the **gospel** to be a royal pronouncement, declaring that a powerful monarch had arrived—one who would usher in a new order of salvation, peace, and blessing. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark chose that word in order to effectively communicate—both to Jews and to Gentiles—that he was presenting the good news of the divine King.

Mark opens his account by noting that this is **the beginning** of his royal declaration. Such naturally stands at the head of his historical account. Yet, it also serves as a reminder that what follows is not the end of the story. The history of Jesus Christ is still being written. The King has not fully taken His throne. One day, He will return to establish His kingdom and He will reign as the eternal Sovereign. Mark’s account only

begins to tell the story of the arrival, ascendancy, establishment, and enthronement of the new King who is far more glorious than all other kings.

In this way, Mark's record of the life of the Lord Jesus opens with language that would signal to his readers that the most glorious King has come—and it is not Caesar. In fact, this divine Monarch sets Himself against all other earthly rivals including Caesar. He is the theme, not only of Mark's history but of all history. And what is His name? Mark wastes no time in declaring who He is: **Jesus Christ, the Son of God.**

The name **Jesus** (Greek, *Iesous*) is His human name. It is a Greek form of the name Joshua (Hebrew, *Yeshua*), which means "Yahweh is salvation." As the angel explained to Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). The term **Christ** is not a name but a title. It is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word translated "messiah," which means "anointed one." A royal title, it was used in the Old Testament to refer to the divinely appointed kings of Israel (cf. 1 Sam. 2:10; 2 Sam. 22:51) and ultimately to the great eschatological deliverer and ruler, the Messiah (Dan. 9:25–26; cf. Isa. 9:1–7; 11:1–5; 61:1). Any Jewish reader would have immediately understood the significance of the title—an explicit reference to the promised Savior of Israel.

The name **Son of God** speaks of Jesus' lineage and right to rule. He is one in nature with God—coeternal and coequal with the Father. For those Roman pagans who wrongly regarded Caesar as a god, Mark introduces them to the true divine King: the Lord Jesus Christ. As Nathaniel said to Jesus, "You are the Son of God, You are the King of Israel" (John 1:49). Throughout the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly demonstrated Himself to be the divine King, and Mark is careful to present the overwhelming case to his readers (cf. 3:11; 5:7; 9:7; 13:32; 15:39). In the first half of his gospel record (chapters 1–8), Mark highlights the Lord's astonishing words and works. In the second half (chapters 9–16), he focuses on Jesus' death and resurrection. Both sections reach the same inevitable conclusion: through His words, works, death, and resurrection, Jesus proved Himself to be the promised messianic King, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Peter's confession articulates this theme in unmistakable language: "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29; cf. Matt. 16:16). That this majestic confession stands in the

middle of the book is certainly no accident. It represents the very heart of Mark's message: the Lord Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be.

In his account **of the gospel of Jesus Christ**, Mark is consumed with the arrival of the greatest King ever: the messianic Monarch who will introduce His glorious kingdom of salvation and usher in a new era for the world. But Mark's gospel is only the beginning of the good news because the story of Christ's kingdom will continue through all of human history and into eternity. Mark introduces the sovereign Savior by looking at three facets of His royal arrival: the promise of the new King, the prophet of the new King, and the preeminence of the new King.

THE PROMISE OF THE NEW KING

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way; The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight.'" (1:2-3)

Having introduced his account as a royal proclamation of the divine King, Mark continues his narrative by introducing the King's forerunner, John the Baptist. Mark's initial focus on John, rather than Jesus, might seem surprising to modern readers. But it is perfectly in keeping with Mark's purpose (to present Jesus Christ as the divine King) and would have been expected by his first-century audience. Earthly monarchs in the ancient world invariably sent official messengers before them to prepare the way, announce their coming, and make the people ready to receive them. So also, the arrival of the divine King was preceded by a royal herald who clearly announced His coming.

In order to introduce John the Baptist, Mark references two Old Testament prophecies—Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3—each of which foretold the ministry of the Messiah's forerunner. The phrase **it is written** was a normal way for New Testament writers to designate quotations from the Old Testament (cf. 7:6; 9:13; 14:21, 27; Matt. 4:4, 6, 7; Luke 2:23; 3:4; John 6:45; 12:14; Acts 1:20; 7:42; Rom. 3:4; 8:36; 1 Cor. 1:31; 9:9; 2 Cor. 8:15; 9:9; Gal. 3:10; 4:22; Heb. 10:7; 1 Peter 1:16). The fact that Mark does not

mention Malachi's name but introduces both with the phrase "**As it is written in Isaiah the prophet**" is not problematic. It was not uncommon at that time, when citing multiple Old Testament prophets, to refer only to the more prominent one and tuck in the others. Because these two prophecies fit together so perfectly and both refer to the same person, they may have been frequently used together by early Christians. The other gospel writers also applied these Old Testament passages to John (cf. Matt. 3:3; 11:10; Luke 3:4-6; 7:27; John 1:23).

Mark's appeal to the ancient Hebrew prophets is an important one, demonstrating that the King's arrival was not a secondary plan or an afterthought. This was the very plan that God had been working out from eternity past. In keeping with that plan, the ancient prophets had predicted the coming of the King's forerunner hundreds of years before he was born.

Mark begins by referencing Malachi 3:1, "**Behold, I send My messenger ahead of You, Who will prepare Your way.**" The Lord Jesus Himself declared this passage to refer to John the Baptist (Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:27). John was sent by God **ahead of** the Messiah as a royal herald to **prepare the way** for the divine King's arrival. Such preparation came through proclamation. John was called to be a preacher, who made a strong call for people to ready themselves for the new King's arrival. An expanded translation of Malachi 3:1 might read, "Behold, I, Jehovah, send My messenger John the Baptist to be the forerunner for You, the Messiah, and to prepare the people for Your coming."

Mark's use of Old Testament prophecy continues with a reference to Isaiah 40:3, "**The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.'**" This passage expands on the mission of the Messiah's herald. In the ancient world, a royal forerunner was charged with making the road ready for the king's arrival. But how was John to do that for the coming Messiah? Rather than clearing literal roads of physical debris, John sought to remove obstacles of stubborn unbelief from the hearts and minds of sinners. The **way of the Lord** is the way of repentance, of turning from sin to righteousness, and of turning spiritual **paths** that are crooked into ones that are **straight** and holy.

In keeping with his calling, John preached to the multitudes who came to hear him **in the wilderness**, fervently pleading with them to

repent. With the fiery **voice** of an impassioned prophet, he was **crying** out with shouts, groans, and pleas for sinners to forsake their sin and seek the Savior. John was both a prophet and the fulfillment of prophecy. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets; yet he was also the forerunner whose ministry the Old Testament prophets had foretold. As the personal herald of the divine King, John was given unparalleled privilege. Because of his elevated role, being so closely associated with the Messiah's coming, he was the greatest prophet to ever live (Matt. 11:11).

As with many passages in the book of Isaiah, the prophecies of Isaiah 40 (including verse 3) anticipated both a short-term, partial fulfillment and a long-term, full fulfillment. In the short-term, the words of Isaiah 40 promised the Jews of the Babylonian captivity that they would one day return to Israel. God would lead them back to their homeland after seven decades of bondage, making a straight path of deliverance for them. When they arrived, the Lord would be with them (cf. Isa. 40:9-11). But Isaiah's prophecy went beyond the Babylonian captivity—since not everything Isaiah prophesied was fulfilled during the Jews' return to Israel in the sixth century B.C. In the long-term sense, Isaiah's prophecy pointed to the coming of the messianic King, and to the one who would precede Him as His forerunner.

All of this was promised in the Old Testament. Mark highlights these promises because he knows they will resonate with his readers, whether Jew or Gentile. The King's arrival—being properly preceded by a royal herald—was promised by God through the Hebrew prophets in centuries past. But there is an additional aspect to those Old Testament prophecies that must not be overlooked. They not only describe the Messiah's forerunner, they also reveal the divine character of the Messiah Himself.

The full text of Malachi 3:1 reads: "Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts." The implications of that prophecy are profound. In that verse, the Lord explained that the coming King, the one before whom the forerunner would be sent, is "Me"—namely, God Himself. The prophecy continues with a promise that the Lord would suddenly come to His temple. It is

no accident that Christ began His public ministry by going to the temple and cleansing it (John 2:13–22). Mark, of course, references only the first part of Malachi 3:1. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he paraphrases it slightly (changing the “Me” to “You”) in order to emphasize that the divine pronoun in Malachi 3:1 refers to the Lord Jesus. His use of this Old Testament passage underscores the divine nature of the Messiah. The new King is none other than God Himself.

The testimony to Christ’s deity is also seen in Isaiah 40:3, where Isaiah prophesied that Messiah’s forerunner would “clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness” and “make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.” The Hebrew word for “Lord” is *Yahweh*, the covenant name for God. The connection is unmistakable: the Messiah is one in nature with Yahweh. The testimony of that reality would be clearly articulated at Jesus’ baptism. Just a few verses later, in Mark 1:11, we find the words of the Father, “You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.”

The world had never seen a King like this. The God of the universe broke into history to provide salvation, blessing, and peace. His arrival had been promised from long ago. He was preceded by a royal herald who proclaimed His coming. The King’s name is Jesus, and He is the Christ, the Son of God.

THE PROPHET OF THE NEW KING

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins. John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.
(1:4–6)

After referencing Old Testament prophecy about the Messiah’s forerunner, Mark continues by stating his name: **John the Baptist**. The name **John** was common in first-century Israel. It means “the Lord is gracious” and is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew name “Johanan” (cf.

2 Kings 25:23; 1 Chr. 3:15; Jer. 40:8). The title **the Baptist** is literally “the baptizer,” a name that distinguished **John** from others with that same name, and identified him with one of the most recognizable aspects of his ministry. John **appeared in the wilderness**, spending the duration of his ministry along the Jordan River, about twenty to thirty miles south of the Sea of Galilee (cf. John 3:23). He had, in fact, grown up **in the wilderness** (cf. Luke 1:80) and that is where he preached and ministered, away from the hubbub of the cities.

The **wilderness** had great significance in Jewish history; it was a constant reminder of the exodus from Egypt and entrance into the Promised Land. That significance would not have been easily missed by those who traveled to hear John’s **preaching** and witness his ministry of **baptism**. As William Lane explains:

The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God. . . . As the people heed John’s call and go out to him in the desert far more is involved than contrition and confession. They return to a place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God’s beloved son must be re-established in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness signifies the acknowledgment of Israel’s history as one of disobedience and rebellion, and a desire to begin once more. (*The Gospel according to Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974], 50–51)

John’s ministry centered on the **preaching of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. As noted earlier, in ancient times, the envoy of the arriving king would go before him, removing all the obstacles in the path and making sure the people were ready to receive the king. But how were the people to prepare for the arrival of the messianic King? They needed to forsake their sin and receive God’s forgiveness. In order to demonstrate their repentance, John called them to be baptized.

John’s **baptism** was a onetime act, distinguishing it from other ritual Jewish washings. In Jewish practice, the closest parallel to John’s

baptism was the onetime washing of Gentile proselytes, a rite that symbolized both their rejection of paganism and their acceptance of the true faith. The ceremony was the mark of an outsider's becoming a part of God's chosen people. For a Gentile proselyte to be baptized was nothing extraordinary. But John's call for Jews to be baptized was radical. In essence, it required them to see themselves as outsiders who must acknowledge that they were no more fit for the Messiah's kingdom than the Gentiles. John's baptism directly confronted the religious hypocrisy that permeated first-century Judaism. It challenged his listeners to consider the reality that neither being a physical descendant of Abraham nor a fastidious observer of Pharisaical laws were sufficient grounds by which to gain admittance into God's kingdom.

Instead, what was required was an internal change of the person's heart, mind, and will. The word **repentance** (*metanoia*) implies a genuine turning from sin and self to God (cf. 1 Thess. 1:9). True **repentance** involves a transformation of one's nature—making it a gracious work of God (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). The fruit (or subsequent evidence) of that internal transformation is seen in changed behavior. As John the Baptist told the crowds, "Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father,' for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Luke 3:8; cf. Matt. 3:8–9).

An initial evidence of that genuine heart transformation was a willingness to be baptized. Those whose self-righteous pride remained would never undergo such a public, humbling act. But those whose minds had truly turned to forsake their sin and pride would eagerly declare themselves to be no better than Gentiles—sinners who recognized their unworthiness and their need to walk rightly before God. Thus, baptism marked the outward profession of inward repentance; it did not generate repentance but was its result (Matt. 3:7–8). Moreover, the act of **baptism** did not produce the **forgiveness of sins** but served as an external symbol of the fact that, through faith and repentance, sinners are graciously forgiven by God (cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; 5:31; 2 Cor. 7:10). Though John's ministry of baptism preceded Christian baptism (cf. Acts 19:3–4), it served a vital role in preparing the people for the arrival of the Messiah. As the apostle Paul explained many years later, "John baptized

with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4).

John proclaimed an urgent message of repentance in preparation for the coming of the messianic King. Consequently, his **preaching** focused on divine wrath and judgment. He confronted the Jewish religious leaders with vivid language: “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” (Matt. 3:7). Speaking of the coming Messiah, he further warned the people, “His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). John’s fiery sermons drove the people to address their sin, as they considered the possibility of being excluded from God’s kingdom. Before they could hear the good news of salvation, they needed to be confronted with the bad news regarding their own wickedness. Only through genuine faith and repentance could their sins be forgiven.

No first-century Jew wanted to be left out of the messianic kingdom. And so the people of Israel flocked from the cities into the wilderness in order to hear from this rugged, countercultural prophet. As Mark explains, **all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.** In the words of one commentator:

By making the pilgrimage to the Jordan, those who believed John’s message showed that they wanted to be visibly separated from those under judgment when the Lord came. They wanted to be members of the future purified Israel. Undergoing John’s baptism helped them anticipate that they were not only God’s covenant people, but that they would remain in that covenant after God cast others out. In order to be assured that they would be included in the future forgiven Israel whose iniquity would be removed, they needed to repent and ask for personal forgiveness now. (Mark Horne, *The Victory According to Mark* [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003], 27)

Multitudes from **Jerusalem**, Jericho, and **all the country of Judea** came to hear John, to confess their sins, and to be baptized by him. By **confessing their sins**, the people agreed with God that they had broken His law and needed to be forgiven. But in the end, this revival proved

to be largely superficial. Sadly, the nation that flocked to John at the peak of his popularity would later reject the Messiah to whom his whole ministry pointed.

The territory of **Judea** was the southernmost division of first-century Israel, with Samaria and Galilee to the north. It included the city of **Jerusalem** and extended from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the Jordan River in the east, and from Bethel in the north to Beersheba in the south. The **Jordan River** is still Israel's major river, flowing from the Sea of Galilee south to the Dead Sea. Tradition suggests that John began his ministry of baptism at the fords near Jericho.

Having described the nature of John's ministry (in vv. 4–5), Mark continues in verse 6 by describing John himself. The New Testament records many wonderful stories about John the Baptist—from his supernatural conception by aged parents, to his being filled with the Holy Spirit while in his mother's womb, to the fact that Jesus called him the greatest man who had lived up to that time. But Mark leaves out those details. In fact, his description of John is short and to the point: **John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey** (1:6). John's physical description fits a man who lived in the wilderness, where clothing fashions were ignored for rugged durability, and where **locusts and wild honey** provided viable sustenance.

But there is more here than a superficial statement about John's wardrobe and eating habits. A hairy garment made of **camel's hair**, girded **around** the **waist** by a rough **leather belt**, would have designated John as a prophet. In fact, the prophet Elijah wore similar attire. In 2 Kings 1:8, Elijah is described as “a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.” The reference to Elijah as a “hairy man” describes the hairy garments made of animal skin that he wore. Those garments were held in place by a leather belt around the waist.

The similarities between John and Elijah are hardly coincidental. As the angel Gabriel explained to Zacharias regarding John:

He will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the sons of Israel back to the Lord their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before Him *in the spirit and*

power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers back to the children, and the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. (Luke 1:15–17, emphasis added)

Jesus reiterated the connection between Elijah and John in Matthew 11:12–14. There He told the crowds who followed Him, “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and violent men take it by force. For all the prophets and the Law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come” (cf. Mal. 4:5). The Lord’s point was that if the Jews had received John’s message as God’s message and received the Messiah he proclaimed, he would indeed have been the Elijah-like figure spoken of by Malachi. But because Israel ultimately rejected John’s gospel witness, another prophet like Elijah is still yet to come, perhaps as one of the two witnesses of Revelation 11:1–19.

John’s diet included **locusts**, which the Mosaic law permitted the Israelites to eat (Lev. 11:22). **Locusts** provided a good source of protein and could be prepared in a variety of ways. Once the wings and legs were removed, the body could be roasted, boiled, dried, and even ground up and baked into bread. **Wild honey** was also available (cf. Judg. 14:8–9; 1 Sam. 14:25–26), and provided a sweet counterpart to locusts. John’s simple diet was in keeping with his status as a lifelong Nazirite (cf. Luke 1:15).

Even Mark’s short description of John is enough to indicate that he must have been a shocking figure to those who saw him. He claimed to be a messenger from God, but his lifestyle was radically different than the other religious leaders of first-century Judaism. Those leaders (the Sadducees and Pharisees) were refined, well-dressed, and sophisticated. John clearly did not care about worldly comforts and even made a point of refusing them. His austere clothing, diet, and way of life were in themselves a rebuke of Israel’s religious elite, who indulged in the pomp and circumstance of their privileged positions. It confronted the common people also—since many of them admired the worldly advantages of their leaders. Significantly, John did not call the people to live or dress like he did. His goal was not to turn them into social recluses or ascetics. Nonetheless, his physical appearance served as a dramatic reminder that the pleasures and pursuits of this world can be stumbling blocks that

keep people from rejecting their sin and turning to God.

THE PREEMINENCE OF THE NEW KING

And he was preaching, and saying, “After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (1:7–8)

The sum of John’s ministry is articulated in these two verses. The entire purpose behind his **preaching** (literally, proclaiming) was to point his listeners to the **One** who was **coming** after him. That is what it meant to be the forerunner, the herald who directed everyone’s attention away from himself and toward the coming King. As John later explained to his disciples, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He rightly understood and embraced his role as the Messiah’s messenger.

Thus he told the crowds, **“After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals.”** The Greek includes a definite article, indicating that John was speaking about *the One* who was **coming**. John’s ministry did not precede just any king or monarch. Rather, he was pointing to *the* divine King whose coming was foretold by the Old Testament prophets. John readily acknowledged that this coming King was **mightier than** he. The Messiah would be greater in every respect, so much so that John did not regard himself as even being **fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals**. Untying the master’s sandals and tending his dusty feet was a task performed by the lowest of slaves. John’s point, then, was that he did not consider himself worthy to be even the lowest slave of such an infinitely exalted King.

John continued to distance himself from Christ by noting the immeasurable difference between their two ministries: **“I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”** It is as if John is saying, “All I can do is wash you on the outside with water. But He can transform and cleanse you on the inside.” Being baptized **with the Holy Spirit** refers to the regenerative work of salvation (cf. Ezek. 36:24–

27; John 3:5–6). This is not a reference to an ecstatic postconversion experience, as some contemporary charismatics claim. Rather, it is the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Spirit that occurs at the moment of salvation (Acts 1:5; 8:16–17; 1 Cor. 12:13; Titus 3:5–7). This is the purification of the new covenant, and the transformation of the new birth.

In the upper room, the Lord Jesus promised to send the **Holy Spirit** to His disciples as “another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16–17). That promise was initially fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Since that time, every believer experiences the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit beginning at the moment of salvation (cf. 1 Cor. 6:19).

John’s statement regarding the Holy Spirit must have thrilled the hearts of the faithful Jews who heard him preach. In keeping with the promises of the Old Testament, they hoped for the day when God would “pour out [His] Spirit on all mankind” (Joel 2:28), when He would “sprinkle clean water on [them],” and “give [them] a new heart and put a new spirit within [them]” (Ezek. 36:25–26). In that day, their hearts would at last be baptized in the very power and person of God Himself (cf. Jer. 31:33). This supernatural power distinguishes the ministry of the new King from any other. John was not able to give the Holy Spirit. Only God can do that. And the coming King is God in human flesh, and He will baptize sinners with the saving power of the Spirit’s regenerative work.

John’s message summarizes the heart of the gospel, bringing us back to Mark’s use of the term in verse 1. The gospel is good news—the glad tidings of a new King who is bringing a new kingdom. The new King is the long-awaited Messiah. He is God Himself. His kingdom is a kingdom of forgiveness, blessing, and salvation. It comes to those who repent. And those who do will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This gospel is the culmination of all past redemptive history and the door to all future glory. And John the Baptist, the faithful herald and forerunner, had come to announce His arrival.