1. Mark 1:1

The beginning of the good news of Jesus the Messiah, God's Son (1:1).

In all probability, the opening phrase of Mark's gospel was originally its title. Since the phrase does not contain a verb, it could hardly have been the first sentence. The book's traditional title, "The Gospel According to Mark," presupposes a collection of "gospels." Mark is the earliest of these volumes, and so could not initially have had this label.

When Mark was writing, "gospel," the Greek word for good news, was already a shorthand designation for the Christian message as a whole. This usage is clearly present in Paul's letters (e.g., Rom 1:16), which antedate Mark's gospel by at least a decade. The same usage occurs in Mark itself (e.g., 13:10).

The title "The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, God's Son" especially alerted Mark's original readers to the fact that he would only narrate the first part of the Christian story. Consequently, this warning should have helped them cope with the disconcerting end of the book when the women flee from the empty tomb and say nothing to anyone.

The title also invites us to pay particular attention to the subsequent use of the descriptions "Messiah" [Christ] and "God's Son." As we shall see, these terms will be crucial in the narrative.

Within the early church for whom Mark was writing, the title Messiah especially suggested a king. Originally Messiah—or to use Mark's Greek term, "Christ"—meant anyone who was anointed. The Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament) direct that anointing be used to install people into various important offices such as the priesthood (Exod 29:7). The "anointed," properly speaking, was the king of Israel or Judah (e.g., Ps 2:2). After the monarchy collapsed, the Hebrew
Scriptures and subsequent Jewish writings looked forward to the coming of a new king who would restore Israel to political greatness. Of course, early Christians believed that in some sense Jesus was the king who fulfilled the scriptural prophecies, even though he had not been an earthly monarch.

The title “God’s Son” was vague, but suggested someone who shared either in God’s divine power or righteousness. In the ancient world, a “son” shared in his father’s social status and obediently served him. Hence, “God’s Son” naturally suggested anyone who somehow exercised divine authority or who was exemplary in obeying God’s law. Not surprisingly, the Hebrew Scriptures call angels “sons of God,” since they have superhuman authority from God and serve him perfectly. These Scriptures also occasionally call the nation of Israel (e.g., Exod 4:22) or its king God’s “Son” (Ps 2:6–7). By the first century, some Jews were referring to any pious human being as God’s son. Thus, Jesus could proclaim that “peacemakers” are “God’s sons” (Matt 5:9).

Of course, in the early church, Jesus was supremely God’s Son, and every Christian was a child of God by adoption. Thus, Paul could refer to Jesus as God’s Son (e.g., Rom 1:3–4) or even as the Son (1 Cor 15:28), and stated that “all who are led by God’s Spirit are God’s sons” (Rom 8:14).

As Mark proceeds, he will clarify what he means when he writes that Jesus is the “Messiah” and “God’s Son.” Specifically, he will indicate that Jesus is not a king in this world, but the ruler of the world to come. Jesus exercises the full authority of God and is fully obedient to him.

**Questions for Reflection:**

Is the story of Jesus’ life the good news or only, as Mark suggests, “the beginning of the good news”? In how many different ways is Jesus “God’s Son”? In how many ways do Christians become God’s sons and daughters through Jesus?
2. Mark 1:2–8

Just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Look, I am sending out my messenger ahead of you, who will get your road ready”; “a voice of someone crying in the desert, ‘Prepare the Lord’s road; make his paths straight,’” John the Baptizer appeared in the desert proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. And all the countryside of Judea and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him, and they were baptized by him in the Jordan River, as they admitted their sins. Now John was wearing camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist, and he was eating grasshoppers and field honey. And he proclaimed, “A man stronger than I is coming after me. I am not fit to bend down and untie the strap of his sandals. I baptized you by water, but he will baptize you with Holy Spirit” (1:2–8).

The purpose of the opening description of John the Baptist is to point forward to Jesus. Mark shows no interest in John as a figure in his own right. Instead, John’s sole aim is to prepare for the coming of Jesus. Indeed, Mark’s description assimilates John to the prophet Elijah who was to prepare for the day of the Lord. John’s hairy clothes and leather belt remind us of Elijah’s appearance as described in 2 Kgs 1:8. “Look, I am sending out my messenger ahead of you, who will get your road ready,” alludes to Mal 3:1, and Malachi looks forward to the reappearance of Elijah to prepare Israel for God’s coming (4:5–6). The following quotation from Isa 40:3, “Prepare the Lord’s road; make his paths straight,” reiterates that John’s role is only to help people get ready for the coming of a greater one. Strikingly, Mark changes the Isaiah passage slightly. Instead of “God’s” paths, Mark uses the word his to make it clear that the prophecy points to Jesus. John’s subsequent statement that he
is not even worthy to untie the sandal strap of this figure and that this “stronger” one will baptize not with water but the Holy Spirit invites the reader to pay special attention to what will occur once this person arrives.

Questions for Reflection:
Is the role of every Christian preacher or teacher to point to Jesus, rather than to oneself? If so, how can we do this?

3. Mark 1:9–13

And it happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And at once, as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit coming down as a dove on him. And there was a voice from Heaven, “You are my beloved Son; in you I am delighted” (1:9–11). And at once the Spirit drove him out into the desert, and he was in the desert forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild animals, and the angels waited on him (1:12–13).

Mark links Jesus’ baptism and temptation even though they differ utterly. The contrast between these brief scenes could scarcely be greater. The baptism occurs in a river and includes a revelation of God; the temptation occurs in the desert and includes a revelation of Satan. Nevertheless, Mark makes these two scenes a single literary section. The same Holy Spirit which Jesus receives at his baptism “at once” drives him out to be “tested by Satan.” Accordingly, in some sense the temptation is the completion of the baptism.
This section gives the reader a fundamental orientation for the entire gospel by suggesting who Jesus is and what his mission will be: Jesus is the Messiah, God's Son, and he must suffer. Thus, on the one hand, the words, "You are my... Son," recall Psalm 2. There God himself addresses the king of Israel and promises to make the nations obey him. By contrast the words "beloved Son; in you I am delighted" also point to obedient suffering. They allude both to God's order to Abraham to sacrifice his "beloved son" Isaac (Gen 22:2) and to the suffering servant in Isaiah with whom God is pleased (Isa 42:1). Significantly, this information about Jesus, which is so vital for the reader to know, comes from no less an authority than a "voice from heaven."

The scene also hints that Jesus' identity will be a continuing problem in the narrative. As soon as we hear the heavenly voice declare that Jesus is God's beloved Son, we learn that Satan tempts him. Mark gives no explanation concerning what the temptation is. However, the progression suggests that somehow the temptation concerns whether Jesus will be faithful to his vocation as God's "beloved Son." Significantly, Mark does not say the temptation ended once the forty days were over. Later in the gospel various demons will continue to test Jesus by declaring publicly that he is "God's Son" (e.g., 3:11).

The narrative implies that no one but Jesus heard the voice. Even though John baptized Jesus, there is no hint that he was privy to what happened immediately thereafter. On the contrary, the text tells us that it was Jesus who saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit descend on him. The voice addresses him alone. Only much later in the gospel do we have a similar voice from heaven announce to those accompanying Jesus, "This is my beloved Son" (9:7).

The juxtaposition of John's prophecy that the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and Jesus receiving the Spirit is striking and suggests that Jesus will baptize with the Spirit, but something must happen first. Since Jesus appears immediately
after John’s prophecy and receives the Spirit, there can be no doubt that he is the one who will baptize with the Spirit. However, the fact that he does not baptize, but instead undergoes temptation from Satan hints that something fundamental must occur beforehand. The gospel subsequently deals with what must happen first and ends before narrating the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

By baptizing with the Spirit, Jesus will abolish the barrier which separates human beings from God. Mark makes this point by stating that the heavens were “torn open.” Within the biblical tradition, the heavens are a solid dome (a “firmament”), and God dwells above it. Hence, the heavens keep God and human beings apart. The rending of the heavens and the coming of the Spirit suggest that there is no separation between Jesus and God. Hence, when Jesus fulfills John’s prophecy by baptizing with the Holy Spirit, he will enable others to share in this full access to the divine.

Mark’s use of “torn” in this text is odd and invites the reader to connect this section with the climax of the gospel. Normally, we do not think of the heavens as something that could tear. Significantly, both Matthew and Luke “improve” Mark by stating that the heavens were “opened” (Matt 3:16, Luke 3:21). As we shall see, at the climax of Mark, the veil of the temple also is “torn” (15:38). Apart from these two passages Mark never uses this word, not even when he describes the action of rending. Instead, Mark tells us that the high priest “ripped his clothes” (14:63).

Questions for Reflection:

Was it inevitable that, when Jesus was baptized and was preparing for his public mission, he would experience a new kind of temptation? Was that testing necessary before he could baptize others with the Holy Spirit? Why? Is it inevitable that, when Christians today get baptized (or take some other major step forward in their spiritual lives), we
will experience a new kind of temptation? Will such testing help enable us to be channels of the Holy Spirit for others?

4. Mark 1:14–20

After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming God’s good news. He said, “The time has come; God’s rule has gotten near. Repent and believe the good news” (1:14–15).

And as he was passing by, along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew, Simon’s brother, casting in the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers for human beings.” And at once, leaving the nets, they followed him. And going on a little, he saw James, Zebedee’s son, and John his brother who were in the boat repairing the nets. And at once he called them, and leaving their father, Zebedee, in the boat with the hired hands, they went away after him (1:16–20).

These verses clearly indicate that a new section of the narrative is beginning. John the Baptist, who dominated the opening section of the gospel, now passes from the scene. Jesus then announces “the time has come,” and he begins to summon his followers.

Yet, even as Mark indicates that a new phase of the story is beginning, he carefully suggests that we are still in a period of preparation. Jesus tells Simon and Andrew not that he is now making them “fishers for human beings,” but only that one day he will.

In this section, we get the first of many indications that Mark is writing primarily for Christians. In these verses Mark
writes as if the persons and events to which he refers are familiar and so require no explanation. Thus, he does not tell us why John was arrested or who Simon is. He assumes we know. Presumably, the only audience which would necessarily have such knowledge would be members of the church. For such readers, John’s arrest would point forward to the death of Jesus.

To these readers, the scene is a reminder that we must follow Jesus without hesitation, no matter what the cost. As the first disciples whom Jesus calls, Simon (Peter), Andrew, James, and John symbolize anyone who would be a disciple. Strikingly, the text emphasizes that Jesus takes the initiative by summoning them. Peter and Andrew then follow Jesus at once, and James and John abandon everything, even their father, and follow. Later we will see that following Jesus without hesitation, no matter what the cost, is a central theme in Mark and addresses a specific crisis in his Christian community.

Questions for Reflection:

How long do we have to follow Jesus before we can proclaim him? What strengths and weaknesses do new followers of Jesus often have?

5. Mark 1:21–39

And they entered Capernaum, and at once on the Sabbath he went into the synagogue and taught. And they were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them like someone who has authority and not as the scribes. And at once there was in their synagogue a person with an unclean spirit, and he shouted out, “What do you have to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? You have come to ruin us!
I know you, who you are, God's Holy One!” And Jesus reprimanded him, “Shut up and come out of him!” And after the unclean spirit convulsed him and cried out in a loud voice, he came out of him. And all were amazed and so discussed with each other, “What is this? A new teaching with authority! He gives orders even to the unclean spirits, and they listen to him!” And a rumor about him at once went out everywhere into the whole surrounding region of Galilee (1:21-28).

And at once they came out of the synagogue and came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying down feverish, and at once they spoke to him about her. And he came to her and grasped her hand and got her up, and the fever left her, and she waited on them (1:29-31).

And when it became evening, when the sun had set, they kept bringing to him all who were sick and possessed with demons. And the entire city was gathered by the door, and he healed many who were sick with various illnesses, and he drove out many demons, and he would not let the demons speak, because they knew him (1:32-34).

And early, while it was still very dark, he arose and came out and went away into a deserted place, and there he began to pray. And Simon and those who were with him hunted him, and they found him and said to him, “All are seeking you.” And he said to them, “Let's go elsewhere to the neighboring towns, so I may preach there also, for I came out for this.” And he went preaching in their synagogues in the whole of Galilee and driving out demons (1:35-39).

This section makes it clear for the first time that the temptation Jesus faces is to gain public approval by becoming known as God's Son. As we saw above, earlier in the gospel just after God declares that Jesus is his Son, Satan tempts him. However, the gospel does not specify what the temptation is. In this section, we now learn that the demons (who presumably are in league with Satan) repeatedly try to publicize the fact that Jesus is God's Son. Jesus silences them. Thus, in the story of the
person with the unclean spirit, the demon shouts publicly that Jesus is “God’s Holy One,” and Jesus must silence it. Similarly, in a summary of many miracles, Mark states, “He would not let the demons speak, because they knew him.” Of course, proclaiming that Jesus is God’s Son makes the public lionize him. Indeed, Mark emphasizes that the first miracle makes Jesus famous throughout the region.

To avoid public approval, Jesus works his miracles only in private or withdraws quickly as soon as he works them in public. He performs his first miracle only after the demon confronts him, and as soon as he performs the exorcism and so provokes public admiration, Jesus retires into Simon’s house. There in private, he heals Simon’s mother-in-law. Then when the whole town besieges him, he does heal many people. However, once again as soon as possible he withdraws to a deserted location. When Simon and his companions succeed in tracking him down and make him aware that everyone is looking for him, he insists on going away to neighboring towns. Subsequently, he performs exorcisms throughout Galilee, but keeps on the move.

Strikingly, Mark emphasizes that Jesus’ mission is primarily to teach and preach rather than to work miracles. At the beginning of the story about the person with the unclean spirit, Mark stresses that Jesus is teaching with authority. Indeed, people are astonished. The exorcism is practically an interruption. The demon noisily confronts Jesus, and he must take action. Even the exorcism itself can be described as “a new teaching.” Later, when Simon and the others track Jesus down and Jesus insists on going elsewhere, he declares he must preach, for that is why he began his work.

Questions for Reflection:

Can popularity be a danger for the Christian missionary? Why? In general, is preaching more important than miracle working? Can a true miracle be a kind of teaching?
6. Mark 1:40–45

And a leper came to him and, begging him, knelt down and said to him, "If you want, you can make me clean." And becoming angry, he stretched out his hand and touched him and said to him, "I do want; be clean." And at once the leprosy left him, and he was made clean. And after he snarled at him, he at once threw him out and said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone, but go off, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as proof for them." But he went out and began to proclaim it a great deal and to spread the word, so he could no longer come into a city openly, but was out in deserted places, yet they kept coming to him from everywhere (1:40–45).

In response to the unwanted popularity Jesus increases his efforts to avoid public acclaim. Jesus tries so hard that his actions become disturbing. The leper acts with extreme deference. His request leaves open the possibility that Jesus may not want to heal him. Yet Jesus responds harshly. As soon as the healing occurs, Jesus "snarls" and throws the man out, warning him not to talk to anyone. In all probability, Jesus’ response is even harsher than we have noted so far. According to some ancient manuscripts, the leper actually knelt before Jesus when making his request, and other manuscripts record that Jesus became angry at the man. Since it is much easier to see why ancient copyists may have omitted such features rather than adding them, I am inclined to think they come from Mark himself. Mark included them to stress how reluctant Jesus is to work a miracle which might lead to public enthusiasm.

As part of this increasing effort to avoid popular acclaim, Jesus now demands that a miracle be kept secret. Previously, Jesus openly worked miracles and tried only to prevent the
demons from revealing his identity. Now for the first time, he attempts to suppress the knowledge that he has healed someone and, therefore, orders the man to “say nothing to anyone.”

Nevertheless, Jesus’ efforts fail, and once again he must withdraw. The man disobeys the order and publicizes the miracle. Consequently, Jesus retreats into the uninhabited countryside.

By disobeying Jesus’ urgent command, the man shows a profound lack of faith. At the beginning of the story, the man expresses at least some confidence in Jesus by saying, “You can make me clean.” Once Jesus cleanses him, however, the man breaks faith. Jesus’ order is emphatic, “See that you say nothing to anyone.” Yet, the man violates it utterly. He proclaims the news “a great deal” and spreads the word. Later, Mark will emphasize that faith primarily consists of persistently seeking and following Jesus.

Questions for Reflection:

Should some miracles be kept quiet? Do miracles sometimes generate the wrong kind of publicity and confuse people about what Christianity actually is?

7. Mark 2:1-12

And when he came back into Capernaum after some days, it was learned that he was at home. And many gathered so there was no longer room, not even in the area by the door, and he was speaking the word to them. And some came bringing to him a paralyzed man who was being carried by four people. And when they could not bring the man to him because of the crowd, they removed the