

Mark 1:1-15

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[0 : 00] It's great to see you as always. Folks, I don't know if you've ever played the game of Guess Who.! It's one of my childhood favourites. In Guess Who, the idea of the game is to guess the identity of the character of your opponent from a selection of about 30 possible characters in the game.

So you use a process of elimination. You ask them questions about the appearance of their character. Do they have brown hair? Are they a man or a woman? Do they have a big nose or a small nose, big lips, small lips and so on.

So you work out their character before your opponent works out your character. It's a great game. Now there's only really so far that you can push this analogy, but Mark's Gospel, it works a bit like a big game of Guess Who.

Except Mark, who wrote the Gospel, is absolutely terrible at playing it. In fact, he wants to let you win. Because right from the beginning of his Gospel, he gives the game away in the first verse, doesn't he? Look at verse 1 there that Steve read.

Mark kicks it off, the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Mark reveals the identity of the main character of his book straight away.

[1 : 30] It's the first thing that he says to us, isn't it? He says to us, as the game begins, listen, my character is a man called Jesus, who is God's King, the Christ, the Son of God.

He gives the game away. But actually he knows that with this particular character, you are going to need more help.

He gives us the answer straight away, but it won't mean we'll automatically win the game. He tells us the answer by name, the identity of Jesus, but the problem still remains for us.

Will we work Jesus out? Will we work him out? Not just in name, but in his nature. Guess who? Mark says. But you know, Mark isn't against us as he writes his book. He wants to help us. He wants us to win and to work Jesus out and to respond to him properly.

[2 : 40] Do you remember, if you were here last week, Mark showed us the right response for Jesus. If you look at verse 15, the last verse that Steve read there, Jesus comes out saying, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. That is Jesus' slogan. And it shows us the response that Mark expects us to have towards Jesus.

But in his opening section here, Mark shows us a collection of voices and of people who say things about Jesus and do things with him to help us to really work Jesus out.

Guess who he says? So there are, I think, about six characters in this section who help us work Jesus out. And I want to take you through three of the main characters, at least three of them. And you may find it helpful to look on the back of your printed sheets that were in your Bibles to see those characters as we move through. So first of all, the first character that we see in this section is a messenger.

[4 : 01] It's a messenger. First of all, Jesus is the one announced by the messenger. Now I think we can see a really important figure in Mark's opening passage here.

He's probably the most important, actually, if you look at verse 4. If we read that. John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And what we've got with this appearance of this guy, John, is a phenomenon. If you look at verse 4 to 8. This man, John, appears, and it's absolutely remarkable what happens.

Look at verse 5. All the country of Judea and Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river, River Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt round his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. Now this man, John, his appearance is slightly odd, isn't it?

[5 : 12] To say the least. I am not sure that I could pull off the camel's skin and leather belt look. And he's eating locusts, isn't he? And honey. It sounds a bit like a stag do that has gone terribly, terribly wrong, doesn't it?

But actually for the crowds who are around, his costume and the things that he does are loaded with meaning. They're bursting with meaning.

So Mark tells us he generates this massive crowd, doesn't he? And his appearance reminds us of the appearance of Elijah, who is in the Old Testament part of the Bible.

John is like a new Elijah. Now Elijah in the Old Testament was one of God's most important messengers. So he's like a new Elijah.

And we see as well that he's in the wilderness, don't we? Around the River Jordan doing this baptism stuff. And again, those places are loaded with meaning for John's listeners.

[6 : 20] Do you remember way back in Exodus, in the story of Moses and the salvation from Egypt, God's people are led through the wilderness, aren't they?

Through the desert. And eventually they cross over the River Jordan into the Promised Land. So John the Baptist gets these great crowds together and it's like a revival, isn't it?

It's like a new Exodus. A new salvation. And it's all about to happen. So it's amazing. It's a phenomenon.

Now what is really surprising is what John then says in verse 7 and 8. If you just glance down. He preached saying, After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie.

I've baptised you with water. But he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. So all of this phenomenal activity, this new Exodus activity, is just part of the build-up.

[7 : 34] It turns out that John here isn't the main player. He's just the messenger boy. There is one coming, he says, who won't just get you wet with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.

God's Spirit. He will change you not just on the outside of your body, but he will change you on the inside. And he says to these folks around him, you need to get ready for him.

Get ready. Confess your sins. Admit your need for forgiveness. Get ready for him. I've given you water, but he will be the Spirit-giver.

So Jesus firstly is announced by this phenomenal messenger who says, get ready for Jesus.

Second though, Jesus is announced by another group of people, the prophets. He's announced by the prophets. And the prophets hope in Jesus.

[8 : 47] Just look at verse 2 and 3. There's another group we hear from, isn't there? As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight. So Mark there quotes some prophets from the Old Testament, doesn't he?

The prophet Isaiah. And actually the prophet Malachi is quoted in there as well. So these prophets have said something in the past which suddenly now has a new resonance in Mark's day.

You know, Emma and I have been watching a new crime series called Endeavour on ITV. It's just finished. It is a really great TV show. It's about the life of Inspector Morse when he was younger, when he first started out.

It's really good. But actually, you know, the one annoying thing at the end of the series was that the producers decided to leave the plot on a ridiculous cliffhanger. So Inspector Morse is left in prison.

[10 : 01] He's falsely accused of murder. All the good guys have been framed for things that they didn't do. And all of the bad guys seem to have gotten away with it.

It's really annoying. And you've got to watch, you've got to wait for a whole year to watch what happens. You're left in suspense. You're waiting for everything to be resolved in the plot.

For things to be put right. You really, really want the next series to come. And I guess that's why it works, doesn't it? But Mark's Gospel, it comes at a point in the whole Bible story where there is a huge cliffhanger still looming.

You know, it's been about 400 years since anybody has spoken God's word to the people. Just turn with me, if you will, to the last book in the Old Testament.

So it's just a couple of books before Mark, to Malachi. Malachi. Malachi, you can find it on page 968 and 969.

[11:10] So Malachi. The last book in the Old Testament. Page 969. Let me just read to you some words from Malachi chapter 3 and verse 1.

Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.

He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. And he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.

Then the offering of Judah in Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old. As in former days. Now Malachi wrote those words about 400 years before Mark was around.

[12:19] And we see there that Malachi has got this great hope that things are going to change. They're going to change significantly. See what he says in verse 4.

He gets a bit reminiscent, doesn't he? Nostalgic. Ah, the good old days. He says, do you remember those old days? The days of old where we offered to God in righteousness.

righteousness. Where our relationship with God was right. What a happy time that was. What a good time. But the problem of Malachi is that's just not how life is now.

If you read the short book of Malachi, it's maybe a 10 minute job, it's a great thing to do. Malachi gives us a sad story of the total breakdown and disintegration in the relationship with God and human beings.

Everything has just fallen apart. There is this cosmic barrier there. And things are so bad in Malachi's time that actually people don't even realise they're bad.

[13:33] That is a bit like today, isn't it? Things have gotten so bad between God and human beings we don't even realise they're bad. It's really so sad.

It's really so dangerous. But Malachi's hope is that that will change. And it will change, do you see, in chapter 3 of Malachi when a messenger announces the arrival of the Lord.

And God then will himself suddenly come. we'll know that when the Lord's messenger announces it. Then the Lord himself will suddenly come. So Malachi says, watch out for the messenger. When the messenger appears, we know that the Lord is coming.

He's coming. He's coming. He's coming. So back to Mark. Back to Mark. Mark quotes the Old Testament prophets, doesn't he?

[14:34] in verse 2 and 3. As if to say the cliffhanger is finally over. The silence is finally broken. Malachi's hope is becoming a reality.

In Malachi's day it was when the messenger appears, the Lord is coming. He's coming. But in Mark's time it's not like that.

John, the messenger arrives, and so now for Mark, the Lord has come. The Lord has come.

Jesus is announced by the messenger, and so Jesus is the hope of the prophets. But there's a third character in this opening section of Mark.

We also see that Jesus is the one affirmed by the Father, by God the Father. Have a little look down at verse 9 there.

[15:37] So Mark says, in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptised by John in the Jordan. So at the beginning of Mark's Gospel we don't get Mary and Joseph, do we?

We don't get any stories of manglers, there are no genealogies, there is no childhood of Jesus. Mark introduces Jesus in a really abrupt way doesn't he?

It's as if Jesus just appears out of nowhere, and he comes and he's almost like everyone else isn't he, being baptised by John. But what happens at his baptism really distinguishes Jesus from everybody else around him.

as he's baptised by John, he comes out of the water, doesn't he? And Mark uses a word that is only used in his Gospel and he only uses it twice.

Look at verse 10. When he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening, and the spirit descended on him like a dove.

[16:47] Now the word opening there is more like the word torn. The heavens were torn, open. That's the unique word there.

As Jesus appears from this baptism, something unprecedented, something truly cosmic occurs there. The heavens are torn, open.

As Jesus appears from the baptism, it's almost like the twitch in the curtains between heaven and earth, suddenly opens, doesn't it, momentarily.

It twitches open, they're torn open. And it's the same word that Mark uses at the end of his Gospel when Jesus dies on the cross. When the temple curtain is torn from top to bottom.

The curtain that divides man from God is torn. heaven. So Jesus appears, and he is the one to break down that dividing wall.

[17 : 54] He will tear open the cosmic divide between man and between God. And a voice comes from heaven at that point, doesn't it, in verse 11.

You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased. Christ. The heavens tear open as Jesus appears, and the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove.

And this voice from heaven, God the Father, booms out. It reminds us of the anointing ceremonies of kings in Malachi's good old days.

the great kings of Israel, like King David, who were anointed with oil, and the Spirit of God rushed upon them. It's Jesus' anointing as God's king here.

The Spirit falls upon him, and God the Father says, I'm delighted in you, my son, my king. Jesus is affirmed by God the Father.

[19 : 06] So everything comes to a head, doesn't it, at the baptism of Jesus. The one whom the messenger announces is the one who the prophets hoped for.

The Spirit giver is here. So it isn't he is coming anymore, it is most certainly he has come. Malachi's dream has come true.

He's the Spirit giver come to change us from the inside. God's pleasing, delightful son, his king. So it's good news.

It is good news. But you know, as we finish this afternoon, Mark changes the mood in the last few verses that we read. Guess who?

He says to us. Even though Mark wants us to win, he knows we are going to need more help to work Jesus out. Because the Lord Jesus has come, but not in the way that we'd expect.

[20 : 09] Look with me at verse 12 to 15 there. After the baptism, the Spirit immediately drove Jesus out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness 40 days, being tempted by Satan.

He was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. There are a few more characters here, aren't we, that we see.

With this new exodus salvation that Jesus brings in, did you notice that the job of the appearing Lord, he finally comes, but it starts not with glory and power and might, but with a trip to the desert, a trip to the wilderness.

He's led by the Spirit of God to be alone. He's driven out by the Spirit of God to face Satan, and he's opposed by the devil, and he's tempted by him for 40 days.

He's with the wild animals, he is threatened. And the phenomenal king's messenger boy in verse 14 is arrested.

[21 : 35] He's opposed by the authorities. So when the Lord arrives, he doesn't arrive with open arms, does he?

But Mark there gives us a hint that as the Lord tears the heavens open, he himself must be torn by opposition.

And he must face temptation, he must face our greatest enemy. You know, verse 12 and 14 seem like bad news, don't they, if it weren't for verse 15.

Because after the temptation, after the arrest, the Lord Jesus again emerges into Galilee. He turns what we think we need from the Lord on its head.

He's led by the Spirit to face Satan. And it's only getting through opposition and evil and temptation and to emerge on the other side that Jesus can show us that he is Lord.

[22 : 44] Then and only then does he and can he say of himself that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. So it really isn't the Lord is coming, the Lord is coming. Jesus says about himself that the Lord has come.

Only though by emerging from temptation and opposition can he truly say that. Jesus hoped in the prophets announced by the messenger affirmed by the father led by the spirit tempted by the devil

and then and only then emerging as self-pronounced king.
Guess who Mark says have you worked him out? Let's pray. Let's■