

Session 1

The Beginning of the Gospel

Mark 1:1-13 | A Ransom for Many: A Catholic Journey Through the Gospel of Mark

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that Mark hands them the answer to the Gospel's central question in its very first verse, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and then spends the rest of the story asking whether anyone inside the story will see it. They will find that the baptism of Jesus is not a quiet riverside scene but a cosmic event: the heavens are torn open, the Spirit descends, and the Father's voice weaves together three Old Testament threads that define who Jesus is and what he came to do.

Catholic Touchstone: The Baptism of the Lord. At the Jordan the Trinity is manifested: the Father speaks, the Son stands in the water, the Spirit descends. The Church teaches that Jesus' baptism is his acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant, and that he sanctifies the waters for our own Baptism (CCC 535-537, 1224).

What You Need to Know

Mark is the shortest, fastest, and most urgent of the four Gospels. There is no genealogy, no infancy narrative, no long opening discourse. Mark begins at a sprint: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*" (Mark 1:1). The word *euangelion* ("gospel," good news) carried a double charge in the first century: Israel knew it from the Greek Isaiah, the herald announcing God's reign (Isaiah 40:9; 52:7), and the Roman world knew it as imperial language, the kind of announcement heralds carried about the accession or victory of a king. Mark seizes that word and declares a different King.

Ancient tradition connects this Gospel to St. Peter's preaching in Rome, with Mark, the John Mark of Acts, as Peter's companion and interpreter. The Church has never dogmatically defined the human authorship of the Gospels, and modern scholars debate the details, but the tradition is early, widely attested, and worth taking seriously. It explains the Gospel's vivid eyewitness texture: Mark alone tells us Jesus was asleep "on the cushion" in the boat (4:38) and that the grass at the feeding was "green" (6:39). Tradition has delighted to hear in such details the texture of an eyewitness's memory preserved through Peter's preaching; hold that as a traditional reading rather than a proof.

Two Greek words drive this session. First, *euthys*, "immediately," which appears over forty times in Mark, giving the Gospel its breathless pace. Second, and more important, *schizo*, "to tear." In verse 10 the RSV2CE says Jesus "saw the heavens opened," but Mark's Greek is stronger: the heavens are *torn apart*. Matthew and Luke both soften it to "opened." Mark chose violence. Hold that word. It appears exactly one more time in this Gospel, at 15:38, and the two tearings frame the entire story. Do not reveal this to the group; they will discover it in Session 14.

Finally, notice what the group should feel by the end of the night: Mark has told the reader who Jesus is (1:1), and the Father's voice has declared it over him (1:11, addressed "to you"). But inside the story, no human character has yet said it aloud. That dramatic tension, the reader knowing what the characters do not, is the engine of Mark's Gospel.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

- **Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1 (with Exodus 23:20).** Mark opens with a composite citation. He names Isaiah, but the first line ("Behold, I send my messenger before your face") is Malachi 3:1, echoing Exodus 23:20, and only then comes Isaiah 40:3 ("the voice of one crying in the wilderness"). Naming the more prominent prophet in a blended quotation was accepted Jewish practice. The theological payload is enormous: in Isaiah 40 the way being prepared is the way of the LORD, of God himself returning to his people. Mark applies it to Jesus. The messenger prepares *his* way. Before a single miracle, Mark has identified Jesus with the God of Israel.
- **Isaiah 64:1.** "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." Isaiah's anguished prayer that God would stop speaking through intermediaries and personally tear through the barrier. Mark's torn-heavens language may deliberately evoke that prayer: the God who had already come down in the Incarnation now tears the veil of heaven open in public manifestation.
- **2 Kings 1:8 and Malachi 4:5.** John's camel hair and leather belt deliberately mirror Elijah's description, and Malachi promised Elijah would return before the great day of the LORD. Mark is signaling: the forerunner has come, so the LORD himself is next.
- **Psalms 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, Genesis 22:2.** The Father's voice at the baptism braids three texts. "You are my Son" evokes Psalm 2, the coronation psalm of the Davidic king. "With you I am well pleased" evokes Isaiah 42:1, the first Servant Song, introducing the Servant who will ultimately suffer for the many (Isaiah 53). "Beloved Son" evokes Genesis 22:2, where Abraham is told to offer "your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love." King, Servant, and beloved son carried up the mountain for sacrifice: the whole Gospel is compressed into one sentence from heaven. And name the endpoint plainly in your own mind, even though the group will discover it gradually: the beloved Son is not merely moving toward suffering, but toward the offering of himself to the Father for the sins of the world, the Servant who "makes himself an offering for sin" (Isaiah 53:10; CCC 606, 613).
- **Wilderness, forty days, wild beasts (Mark 1:12-13).** Forty days recalls Israel's forty years of testing after passing through the waters. Where Israel failed, the beloved Son is faithful. Many commentators, ancient and modern, also hear an echo of Eden in "he was with the wild beasts": a new Adam at peace with creation where the first Adam fell. The Church has not defined this reading, and Mark does not spell it out, but it harmonizes with CCC 538-540, which presents Christ as the new Adam who recapitulates Israel's trials and remains faithful where Adam gave way.

Voices of the Church

Voices of the Church: Papias of Hierapolis (2nd century, preserved by Eusebius, Church History 3.39)

Papias, a bishop writing within living memory of the apostles, records the tradition that Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote down accurately, though not in strict order, what he remembered of the Lord's words and deeds, taking care to omit nothing he had heard and to state nothing falsely. This is our earliest window into how the Church received this Gospel: as the preaching of Peter, preserved by his companion.

Voices of the Church: St. Irenaeus of Lyons (Against Heresies 3.1.1)

St. Irenaeus, taught by St. Polycarp who knew the apostle John, testifies that after the departure of Peter and Paul, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, handed down to us in writing the things

Peter had preached. For St. Irenaeus, the Gospel's apostolic root anchors its witness: what you hold in your hands is Peter's preaching; and as Sacred Scripture its authority rests on divine inspiration.

Voices of the Church: St. Jerome (Preface to his Commentary on Matthew)

Reflecting on the four living creatures of Ezekiel and Revelation as images of the four evangelists, St. Jerome assigns the lion to Mark, because his Gospel opens with a voice roaring in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord." This is why the lion became the enduring symbol of St. Mark. It fits the whole book: sudden, powerful, untamed, a Gospel that moves like a lion on the hunt.

Catechism Connection

- **CCC 535-537:** Jesus' baptism is his acceptance and inauguration of his mission as the suffering Servant; he allows himself to be numbered among sinners, and the open heavens, the Spirit, and the Father's voice manifest the Trinity. In our own Baptism we are plunged into his.
- **CCC 538-540:** The temptation in the wilderness: Christ as the new Adam who remains faithful where Adam fell, recapitulating Israel's forty years of testing in his forty days.
- **CCC 1224:** Our Lord submitted to John's baptism, meant for sinners, to "fulfil all righteousness," a manifestation of his self-emptying.
- **CCC 436:** "Christ" means "Anointed One" (*Mashiach*); in Israel priests, prophets, and kings were anointed for their mission, and Jesus fulfills all three.
- **CCC 422:** "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son." The Gospel is the good news that the promises have been kept.

Thread Watch

Thread Watch (leader only)

Torn (*schizo*): PLANTED this session at 1:10. The heavens are torn open and the Father declares "my beloved Son." Do not tell the group the word recurs. It resolves at 15:38-39, where the temple veil is torn and a centurion declares "Son of God."

The Messianic Secret: SEEDED this session. Mark tells the reader Jesus' identity in 1:1, but no human character knows. The silence commands begin next session (1:25, 1:34). Take-Home 1 carries the sealed My Guess box tied to this thread.

The Way (*hodos*): PLANTED at 1:2-3, "prepare the way of the Lord." Develops through the central discipleship section ("on the way," chapters 8-10) and resolves with Bartimaeus following Jesus "on the way" at 10:52.

The Bread: Not yet planted. First appears in Session 6 (feeding of the five thousand) and resolves at the Last Supper. Hold this in view from tonight: the beloved Son carried toward sacrifice will one day give his own body as food, and in Mark the sacrifice and the meal are one gift.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain why Mark 1:1 functions as the thesis of the whole Gospel and can state the dramatic tension it creates.
2. Participants discover the composite Old Testament citation in Mark 1:2-3 themselves and can articulate what it implies: the way being prepared is the way of the *LORD*.
3. Participants connect the torn heavens to Isaiah 64:1 and the Father's words to Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 42:1, and Genesis 22:2.
4. Participants can answer the "low Christology" objection from Mark's own text.
5. Participants leave with a concrete practice: renewing their baptismal identity daily this week.

Time Note (90 Minutes)

Win 15 min | Build 55 min | Send 15 min | Closing prayer 5 min. **Pre-chosen cuts if running long:** drop Build question 9 (wild beasts and Eden, cover its content in one leader sentence) and the second Dig Deeper box (the manuscript note). Do not cut the steelman chain or the discovery of Isaiah 64:1; they carry the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Leader: Father, at the Jordan you tore open the heavens and would not stay distant from us. You named Jesus your beloved Son, and in Baptism you have spoken that same word over each of us. Send your Holy Spirit on this table tonight. Open the Scriptures to us, and open us to the Scriptures, that we may know your Son and follow him wherever the way leads. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Think of the best news you have ever received in your life. How did it arrive, and what did you do in the first sixty seconds after hearing it?
2. When you hear the word "gospel," what do you picture? Where do you think that word came from before Christians used it?

Leader bridge: Tonight we open the shortest, fastest Gospel, very likely the memories of St. Peter himself, written down by his companion Mark. It begins with a single verse that gives away the ending, and then dares us to watch the whole world miss it.

Build (55 minutes)

Read Mark 1:1-13 aloud slowly, once through. Then work through the questions.

1. **Verse 1 is not a sentence; it is a title. What three claims does Mark make about Jesus in his first eleven words?** Let the group find them.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

(1) He is *Jesus*, a real man in history, whom Mark locates in Nazareth two verses later (1:9). (2) He is the *Christ*, the Messiah, the anointed King promised to David. Make sure the group hears that "Christ" is not a last name: it is a title, *Christos*, the Greek rendering of the Hebrew *Mashiach*, "Anointed One." In Israel three kinds of men were anointed with oil for their mission: priests, prophets, and kings. Jesus fulfills all three in fullness (CCC 436). (3) He is the *Son of God*. Notice also the word "gospel" (*euangelion*): in the Roman world this was a herald's announcement about an emperor, news of an accession or a victory. Mark is making a royal proclamation, and Caesar is not the king it announces. One more thing: Mark tells YOU this in verse 1. No person inside the story has heard it. Keep asking all study long: who knows, and how did they find out?

2. **DISCOVERY: Mark says he is quoting "Isaiah the prophet." Split the group: half look up Isaiah 40:3, half look up Malachi 3:1. Read both aloud. What do you notice?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Mark's quotation is a blend. Line one ("Behold, I send my messenger before your face") is Malachi 3:1, which itself echoes Exodus 23:20; line two ("the voice of one crying in the wilderness") is Isaiah 40:3. Naming the greater prophet when weaving texts together was normal Jewish practice, not an error. Now the crucial step: in Isaiah 40, whose way is being prepared? Read the verse again. It is the way of the LORD, the way of God himself, coming in person to comfort and rescue his people. Mark applies that text to Jesus. Before Jesus says a single word in this Gospel, Mark has identified him with the God of Israel. So much for the idea that Mark has a "low" view of Jesus.

3. **Look at how John the Baptist is described in verses 4-6: the wilderness, the camel's hair, the leather belt. DISCOVERY: someone look up 2 Kings 1:8, and someone else Malachi 4:5. Who is John dressed as, and why does that matter?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

John is dressed as Elijah: Mark's camel's hair garment and leather belt (1:6) deliberately evoke the prophet 2 Kings 1:8 describes as a hairy man with a leather belt about his loins. The two descriptions are not word for word identical, and they do not need to be; the costume alone identified the man. Malachi 4:5 promised that Elijah would return before "the great and terrible day of the LORD." Mark's point is a drumroll: if the Elijah figure has arrived, then the next one to walk on stage is the LORD himself. And the next person to walk on stage, in verse 9, is Jesus of Nazareth.

4. **Verse 10 in our translation says Jesus "saw the heavens opened." Mark's Greek word is *schizo*, "torn apart," the word you would use for ripping fabric. DISCOVERY: look up Isaiah 64:1. What prayer is being answered at the Jordan?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Isaiah 64:1: "O that you would rend the heavens and come down." Israel's desperate prayer that God would stop being distant, tear through the barrier, and come in person. At the Jordan, many hear that prayer being answered in public: the Son, already among us, is manifested as the heavens tear. Matthew and Luke both say the heavens were "opened"; Mark alone says torn. A door that has been opened can be closed again; something torn open cannot simply be shut. The image is Mark's way of saying what the Church teaches plainly: in Christ, God has permanently opened access between heaven and earth, a "new and living way" (Hebrews 10:19-20). He is not going back to distance.

5. **The Father speaks: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). DISCOVERY: divide into three groups. Group one: Psalm 2:7. Group two: Isaiah 42:1. Group three: Genesis 22:2. Each group reads its verse aloud and reports what it adds to the Father's sentence.**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Psalm 2:7 ("You are my son") is the coronation psalm of the Davidic king: Jesus is the KING. Isaiah 42:1 ("my chosen, in whom my soul delights," on whom God puts his Spirit) opens the Servant Songs that climax in Isaiah 53, the Servant who suffers for the many: Jesus is the SERVANT. Genesis 22:2 ("your son, your only son, whom you love") is Abraham told to offer Isaac on the mountain: Jesus is the BELOVED SON carried toward sacrifice. King, Servant, beloved Son bound for the altar. The Father has preached the entire Gospel of Mark in one sentence, and the reader has heard it before any human character has confessed it.

Dig Deeper

The voice says "with you I am well pleased" before Jesus has performed a single miracle, preached a single sermon, or called a single disciple. The Father's delight is not a wage paid for performance. If you are baptized, you have been adopted into the beloved Son, and in him the Father's "beloved" truly rests on you (CCC 1265). Everything you do for God flows from that word; nothing you do earns it. This is why the Church has us renew our baptismal promises every Easter, returning to the identity that precedes all our work.

6. **STEELMAN, build it strong before you answer it. Some readers, ancient and modern, argue that Mark teaches an "adoptionist" Christology: Jesus was an ordinary man who BECAME God's Son at his baptism. Their case: Mark has no virgin birth, no infancy narrative, no pre-existence language like John 1; a few early manuscripts even lack "the Son of God" in 1:1. The story simply opens with a man getting baptized and a voice declaring sonship, and Psalm 2:7 was a coronation formula, the day a man became king. Have the group state this case as persuasively as they can. Then ask: does Mark's own text support it? Where has tonight's study already answered it?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Take the objection seriously; it is built on real observations. But the text itself dismantles it. First, Mark 1:1: the narrator confesses Jesus as Son of God before the baptism ever happens (and even where a few manuscripts lack the phrase in 1:1, the Father's declarations at 1:11 and 9:7 and the whole book's architecture carry it); the title is the premise of the book, not a status acquired in chapter one. Second, Mark 1:2-3: the composite citation identifies Jesus with the LORD whose way is prepared, language that strains any exaltation reading, for the messenger prepares the way of the LORD himself. Third, listen to the verb: "You ARE my beloved Son," not "you have now become." The baptism reveals and inaugurates; it does not create. The heavens tear open to announce what is already true. Mark writes a Gospel of discovery: the reader is told the truth on page one and then watches the world catch up. That is a literary strategy, not a lower doctrine.

7. **Why would the sinless Son of God stand in line for a baptism of repentance meant for sinners (1:9; see also 1:4-5)? What does that tell you about how he intends to save us?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He is not confessing sins; he has none. He is standing where sinners stand. From his first public act, Jesus places himself among the guilty, numbering himself with us, an overture of the cross, where he will be counted among transgressors in earnest. The Catechism puts it beautifully: his baptism is his acceptance and inauguration of his mission as the suffering Servant, and it anticipates the "baptism" of his bloody death (CCC 536). He also sanctifies the waters: because he went down into the Jordan, our Baptism truly plunges us into him.

8. **Immediately after the baptism, "the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness" for forty days of testing (1:12-13). Where has Israel heard "through the waters, then into the wilderness, then testing" before?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

The Exodus. Israel passed through the Red Sea, entered the wilderness, and was tested forty years, and failed, grumbling and worshiping the golden calf. Jesus passes through the Jordan's waters, enters the wilderness, is tested forty days, and is faithful. He is re-living Israel's story and getting it right, the faithful Son where the first "son" (Exodus 4:22) failed. Note also that it is the Spirit who drives him there: the testing is not an accident interrupting the mission; it is the mission's first campaign.

9. **Mark adds a strange detail no other Gospel has: "he was with the wild beasts" (1:13). What might that evoke?**

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Let the group speculate; there is no defined answer. Many commentators, ancient and modern, hear Eden: a Son of God at peace among the animals, where Adam once was before the fall, with angels ministering to him. Mark does not spell it out, and the Church has not defined this reading, so hold it lightly, but it harmonizes with the Church's teaching that Christ is the new Adam who conquers where Adam fell (CCC 538-540). Others simply hear danger: the wilderness is the untamed edge of the world, and the Son walks into it unafraid. If the Eden echo is right, paradise lost has begun to be paradise regained; if the simpler reading is right, the Son walks the world's wild edges unafraid. Both preach.

Dig Deeper

Honest footnote for the curious: a few early manuscripts of Mark 1:1 lack the phrase "the Son of God," and scholars debate whether a copyist added or accidentally dropped it. The phrase is well attested and the Church's translations, including our RSV2CE, include it. And nothing hangs on the debate: the Father declares Jesus' sonship at 1:11 and 9:7, the demons know it, and the whole Gospel drives toward a human confession of it. Mark's message is the same either way. We can afford to be honest about small questions because the big claim is everywhere.

Send (15 minutes)

1. God tore the heavens open rather than stay distant from you. Where in your life have you been assuming God is distant, waiting, or withholding, and what would change if you took the torn heavens seriously?
2. The Father's "beloved" came before any accomplishment. Who is one person in your life this week who needs to hear who they are before they hear what they should do, and what will you say?

Live It This Week

- Each morning, before checking your phone, make the Sign of the Cross with intention and say: "I am a beloved son / daughter of the Father." Let the day begin from identity, not performance.
- Once this week, bless yourself with holy water on entering a church and consciously renew your baptismal promises: reject sin, profess the Creed's first line.
- Read Mark 1:1-13 once more on your own, slowly, and mark every Old Testament echo you can now hear.

Closing Prayer

Leader: Father, you did not stay behind the veil. You tore the heavens and came down to us in your beloved Son. Teach us this week to live from the name you gave us in Baptism, beloved, and to prepare the way of the Lord in our own wilderness. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen. (Together: one Our Father.)

Scripture Memory Verse

"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11, RSV2CE)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Primary text: Mark 1:1-13

Every passage used this session, in order:

- Mark 1:1 (title verse: Christ, Son of God)
- Mark 1:2-3 (composite citation)
- Isaiah 40:3 (voice in the wilderness; the way of the LORD)
- Malachi 3:1 (I send my messenger)
- Exodus 23:20 (background echo of the messenger)
- Mark 1:4-6 (John the Baptist)
- 2 Kings 1:8 (Elijah's clothing)
- Malachi 4:5 (Elijah before the day of the LORD)
- Mark 1:9-11 (the baptism; the torn heavens; the voice)
- Isaiah 64:1 (O that you would rend the heavens)
- Psalm 2:7 (You are my son: the King)
- Isaiah 42:1 (my chosen, in whom my soul delights: the Servant)
- Genesis 22:2 (your son, your only son, whom you love: the beloved son offered)
- Mark 1:12-13 (wilderness, forty days, wild beasts, angels)
- Exodus 4:22 (Israel is my first-born son, background)
- Isaiah 53:10 (he makes himself an offering for sin, leader background)
- Hebrews 10:19-20 (the new and living way, leader background)
- CCC 422, 436, 535-537, 538-540, 606, 613, 1224
- Memory verse: Mark 1:11