

# START

## The Start is the Hardest Part



**T**he first step can be the most frightening; the start can be the hardest part. We are “maintain” people. We can keep stuff going. But how do we get moving on something different? Maybe God is calling you to start something new—to take a new step in a new direction in the new year. The first chapter of Mark gives us the Gospel version of “Start.” It shows how the Jesus started his ministry. This series will encourage you to give it a try. To start.



## START • Mark 1:9-13 • Tim McConnell • January 21, 2018

"The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." (Mark 1:1) We are looking at making a Start in January, following Jesus through the beginning, the start, of His ministry. I hope we can give each other a little encouragement, a little kick maybe, to get us over the hump of fear of the start. We need a little accelerant sometimes to get us going. Abigail and I were honored to attend a celebration last week for a couple in our church, Chuck and Annie Moore, marking their twentieth wedding anniversary. It was very moving, what they decided to do—they decided to renew their vows, and they had the pastor who married them in Ohio come out and read the exact text of his charge to them and their vows from twenty years ago. It reminded me of one of the first weddings I performed. I was nervous, the bride was nervous, and the groom was an absolute mess, so I promised, "you can trust me. You don't have to memorize anything, just repeat after me, say what I say and you'll be good." It started out fine, "I so and so take you so and so to be my wife, (I take you...)" etc. "In plenty and in want (in plenty and in want), in joy and in sorrow (in joy and in sorrow)." Then I was supposed to say, "in sickness and in health," but what came out was "in sickness and in death." I waited. Okay, come on. He actually said it! That's when I heard it! "Oh, what did I say? No, you get health. I'm sure you get health too!"

Anything we do, everything we start, it leads to ups and downs. We can get stuck on the downs. We are tempted to give up when we experience the downs. But it's not all sickness and death, we get the upside too sometimes! Young couples making their vows of marriage really have no idea what's coming next. They don't. But if God is calling you to start something, you have to start. We can't afford to lose what we will lose if we never start what God calls us to start. Every great endeavor has a beginning, a start. And every great story has ups and downs. There is no victory without some conflict. There is no progress without pressure. There is no testimony without a test. Every great story has a problem, or challenge, or impossible situation that must be overcome. How about your story? Are you tempted to give up on what God has called you to do when the challenge comes along? Don't give up. Don't assume difficulty means a dead end. The friction may just be what you need to get traction on your dream. The friction you feel may be the traction you need. But success can also be a temptation to falter. Highs can be as dangerous as lows. As they say, success can be more dangerous than failure. Success poorly-handled breeds failure; but failure well-handled

yields success. Don't lose your footing in the highs; don't give up in the lows. Every great start leads right into highs and lows, ups and downs, but through it all the faithfulness of God is proved. Keep on.

As Jesus begins His ministry in this passage, He is thrust into highs and lows, ups and downs. He was baptized, He went down into the river Jordan in verse 9. Then in verse 10, He comes up out of the water. The Holy Spirit comes down on Him like a dove, with a voice coming down, but the voice lifts Him up with the good news of God's love (verse 11). Then Jesus is sent out to a low place in the wilderness, but is attended to by angels who lift Him up. Ups and downs; highs and lows. Through it all He doesn't give up. In fact, the ups and downs only serve to prove God's faithfulness. Don't give up when things are down and don't go down when things are up! Ups and downs are part of the story. Highs and lows are worth the swing—they reveal the faithfulness of God.

Let's walk along—ride along!—this rollercoaster of a start with Jesus. "At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan." (Mark 1:9) Jesus was baptized. Jesus, sinless, knelt down in the waters of baptism for the forgiveness of sins. He went down into the waters of baptism. Let's say a few things about this. This is a down. Jesus went down. Jesus' baptism is the beginning of His public ministry. It is still a beginning. Baptism is a beginning, it's a gateway rite, a sacrament of beginning in faith, beginning in the life of the church. We baptize infants here at this church because we want that beginning to begin as soon as possible; we profess that faith begins with God's grace moving toward us first long before we know how to reasonably respond. Jesus' baptism was a beginning. When Judas needed to be replaced, the church in Acts 1 said the replacement had to be someone who was "with us the whole time the Lord Jesus was living among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us." (Acts 1:21-22) The baptism was the beginning. This could be an entire sermon of its own, the baptism of Jesus, but let me just say quickly—Jesus did this to come down to us. Every bit as much as the incarnation celebrated at Christmas was a 'coming down' to us, baptism is Jesus coming down to us. Jesus, though Himself without sin, associates Himself with us who need the forgiveness of baptism. He gets down to where we are so we can get up to where He is. Down.

Then up. Verses 10-11, "Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and

the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:10-11) Baptism is a down that turns up. You go down, then you come up. That's why some Christians value the full immersion because you get to see that happen. You go down in order to come up. You die to yourself in order to find new life in Christ. Jesus comes up from His baptism and shows us new life. The heavens open up and the Holy Spirit comes down on Him. (Lots of ups and downs!). Now, all of this is to give us confidence that Jesus is indeed who He said He was. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. With the Spirit comes a voice from heaven, "You are my Son, my Beloved." No one can question a voice from heaven. This all stands on prophecy about the coming Messiah, like Psalm 2:7 for example: "I will proclaim the Lord's decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father.'" No one watching would wonder if Jesus is the promised Messiah or not. Jesus went down in baptism to associate with us, then the Father spoke from heaven to associate with Him. Down then up. After the going down in baptism there is the lifting of Jesus by Spirit and Word.

And he must have felt really good right then! Can you imagine? What a moment. There is nothing like a father's blessing. Especially in front of a crowd. Especially when the Father is God! This was a high, don't you think? "Jesus, which days on earth did you really enjoy?" "Well, there was that first day in the Jordan... God my Father ripped open heaven and shouted down for everyone to hear: 'That's my boy! Love you, Son! You're awesome.' That was a good day." Now, what would you write for verse 12? Jesus has just been named Son of God. He has just been declared blessed and beloved by God the Father in heaven. "And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'" (Mark 1:11) What's next? Then gold coins rained down from heaven. The people were all showered with glitter and diamonds and swag bags worth thousands. A Humvee limousine pulled up with an automatic red carpet that rolled out all the way down into the river... Jump in Son! Nope. "At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness." (Mark 1:12) Which is a little light for what the Greek says. You might have a translation that says "drove him out" and you might even say "tossed him out." The Spirit immediately picked Him up and chucked Him into the woods! Ups and downs. I don't know, do you ever feel like your life has some ups and downs? Ever been in a spot thinking, "Man, just yesterday everything was going great! Now this!" You're not alone. Jesus knows the ups and downs.

"And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him." (Mark 1:13) From the high of the open heavens and the great, public blessing of God the Father naming Him His Beloved Son, now this. From face to face with God in heaven to face to face with the devil himself. Chucked into the wilderness. Jesus was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted, harassed, accused by Satan—the deceiver, the author of lies. "You're not the Son of God. You're not beloved by God. Look at you." Maybe Jesus should give up right then. Maybe God calls you to start something, but then it gets hard... Maybe the difficulty is a sign of disaster, the wind in your face means it's time to tack another direction. No. The ups and downs are a part of it. From the high of the divine blessing Jesus goes head into His greatest opposition. Jesus is the truth. Satan's only power is deception. Jesus goes head to head with the father of lies. He is "tempted." Remember: a test is something used to promote. You take a test to move on to the next subject, to pass on to the next challenge. A test is used to promote, but a temptation is used to destroy. Satan wants to destroy Jesus and destroy His ministry. But what Satan wanted to be a temptation for destruction God used as a test for promotion.

Jesus was not only face to face with His worst adversary, Mark says He was "with the wild animals." Surrounded by wild animals ready to rip Him to shreds. Where do you look for comfort? In your face is Satan, the accuser, trying to convince you that all you heard from God is false, that you have no value, you are no child of God, there are no purposes or callings or victories out ahead of you, you're nothing, worthless, give up, die. Then you look all around you to see nothing but bloody claws and gnarling fangs waiting to rip you apart. That's a low. Have you ever felt the weight of the wild beasts all around you? Everything is against me. Everything is against me. But Jesus held firm. What you learn in the lows is just how solid the foundations are. It's when you get low, you hit the bedrock. You find what is firm when the storm blows. Jesus stands firm. And you know what? After that He can face anything. What are the Pharisees and the Scribes compared to the wild beasts of Mark chapter 1? Who is Pontius Pilate compared to the accusations of Satan himself?

Was this a low? You bet. But what did it do? It set Jesus up not only to start, but to finish strong. Make it through the downs and you will find foundations to carry you all the way through. It may even be what you find in the down time that sustains you through the up

times. Jesus was face to face with Satan, surrounded by wild beasts. But look who else was there! One final up: "...and angels attended him." Angels attended Him, served Him, they were His ministers, His deacons...His help. Have you had some ups and downs? Every great story has conflict, some challenge to overcome. Don't give up on the down. God is there.

I had lunch with a man recently who is on a new footing with his faith. Christmas this year actually is where he marks a serious turn toward a new foundation of faith in Christ. He said it was the culmination of something that started with the birth of his daughter. Yup. Been there! Some say we meet God easiest in the highs or the lows of life, we meet God in the great joys and in the great crises of life. When you look down at that little infant girl as a dad, I'm sure it's the same for a mom, but there's a crack in the armor of any self-sufficient man. It's overwhelming, the treasure of that life, the value of it, the preciousness and vulnerability, the responsibility to protect. There's a moment you look down on your child as a dad and think, "Man, which one is this? Is this a joy or is this a crisis?" Yup. God's in both.

Back to our friends who renewed their vows last week. Annie said to me, "You forget a lot of that language, you know? For richer for poorer, in good times and bad times. Twenty years ago, if I heard that bad stuff I didn't register it really. I just heard 'good,' 'rich,' 'healthy!' But now looking back after twenty years, it was in the hard times that the love got proved." It's in the hard stuff that the foundations are tested and tried. It's in the down times that the pillars and supports are exposed. It's in the downs that we find that God is faithful. Don't give up when things go down. Some of those moments are going to be the moments that shine brightest when your life story is written, the moments you look back and say "There, right there, God carried me." God is faithful through the ups and downs. And remember, no matter how high you go, Jesus has been higher. And remember, no matter how low you go, Jesus has been lower. He's got you. He's been there. He's with you. Set aside your fear, look to Jesus, and carry on.

## STUDY GUIDE

### START • Mark 1:9-13

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God's Word

Read our passage, Mark 1:9-13. Allow a few moments to silently reflect on what you heard. Read it one or two more times.

- What do you notice about our passage? What stands out to you? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- According to verse 11, what does God the Father say to Jesus? What impact do you think the Father's words would have had on Jesus as He began His ministry?
- How is Jesus provided for and sustained in the wilderness? How does God meet us in the ups and downs?
- If someone said to you, "If it is difficult, God must want you to stop," what would you say in response?
- What is a word, phrase, or thought from today's passage that God seems to be lifting up as being significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God's Mission

Have you ever found yourself facing difficulty and wondered if God wanted you to stop? Reflect on an example from your life. What did the Lord teach you in that situation?

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Ups and downs can cause discouragement. Who is one person you can encourage this week? Take that step and encourage them with your words, with your presence, or with a small token of encouragement.