

The King's Proclamation

The Servant King & the King's Servant: A Study in Mark 1-10 Sermon 2

Mark 1:14-20

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During my senior year of high school, some of my classmates were getting gifts—gifts celebrating the completion of a milestone, high school. Some friends got really nice gifts, like cars. On my graduation day, my parents gave me a Bible. It had my initials on the cover. It was a nice gift. But honestly, when I compared it to my friend's red Mustang, it was a little disappointing.

Fast forward a few years, now to the end of college. For reasons unknown to me, God had awakened me to much bigger thoughts and questions, about the world, about life. I'd come to yearn for meaning and purpose. I'd begun asking questions about life and death. I'd come to put my faith in Jesus Christ. And during that time, that Bible had come to mean the whole world to me. I wouldn't have traded it to you for the keys to your Mustang—and still wouldn't.

Sometimes we don't recognize the goodness of what's been given to us. A gift can sit in our possession for years, and we have no real sense of its worth, or what it means. Sometimes it takes time to properly receive, unwrap, and realize what a gift really means.

Today, in our study of Mark's Gospel, we arrive at a quite significant passage: the first words of Jesus' public ministry, his proclamation of the "Gospel of God" (1:14). Here, in a sentence, Jesus summarizes why he's come: "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel" (1:15). Jesus has come to bring and proclaim the good news of God's reign.

The Son of God, offering the Gospel of God, is the Great Gift of God. And it's offered to us—to me, to you. For some, this is a gift you've received long ago and already begun to unwrap. To you, I would say: there is still so much more to the gift of the Gospel of God given to you in Jesus Christ. You will spend an eternity continuing to plumb its depths.

For others, this is a gift—this *good news of God's reign*—you've never received, perhaps something you don't find very interesting or alluring at all. To you I would say something similar: there is so much more

for you to discover about the gift of God given in Jesus Christ. Perhaps, in God's mercy, you'll find your heart surprisingly open to receive it today.

For all of us, then, when we hear Jesus' proclamation in Mark 1:14-15, of the good news of God's reign, we have so much more to receive, unwrap, and realize. The word "gospel" literally means "good news." Jesus uses it twice in these verses. Turning to them now, I want to help us see more of the goodness of this Good News.

I. Good News about Time

Perhaps a strange place to start is not with *what* Jesus says in vv. 14-15, but *when* and *where* he says it. The setting, or timing, of Jesus' proclamation is the first thing Mark, and Jesus, stress. Verse 14 begins by telling us that Jesus begins his ministry "after John was arrested," and "in Galilee," (1:14). And Jesus opens his proclamation with a further note about setting, or time: "The time is fulfilled" (1:15).

The Good News of God's reign is not random, but happening according to a specific time, or plan. Hundreds of years before Jesus walked into Galilee preaching, God had planned exactly when and where His Gospel would be announced. It's recorded in the prophet Isaiah:

But there will be no gloom for her who was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light.... (Isaiah 9:1-2).

The prophecy was that a light would come into the darkness—that is God incarnate, Jesus. It was that this would happen in a little area known as "Galilee." That's where Jesus is. And it prophecies that when this happened there would be a great "turning of the times," from "the former time" to "the latter time." This is what Jesus means when he says, "the time is fulfilled."

Jesus' ministry enacts a great turning of the ages in God's plan of redemption. It's a turn from the age of *promise* to the age of *fulfillment*. From the time of Abraham up to the ministry of John the Baptist, God was making promises, He was covenanting, with His people. This was a season, a time, that was

culminating in John the Baptist's ministry: As Jesus summarizes elsewhere, "All the prophets and the Law prophesied until John [the Baptist]" (Matthew 11:13).

Now, God is beginning to fulfill His promises.

- God promised He would return to dwell with his People—in Jesus, He had (John 1:14).
- God promised that through Abraham, He'd create a family from all families of the earth; in Jesus' Body, the Church, God is doing this (Acts 2; Galatians 3:27-28).
- God promised He'd pour out His Spirit into our hearts, enabling us to love and serve Him; in Jesus, He is (Ezekial 36:27; Mark 1:8; Acts 2). In Jesus, we enter the age of fulfillment; the flowering of God's promises made in the Old Testament.

Now there is an overlap to the time we are in, of course. God's promises to fully create a New Heaven and New Earth, to wipe away every tear, to do away with death, are not fully realized. This is why Jesus says, "the kingdom of God is *at hand*," meaning, it's drawing near, dawning, arriving—but not fully realized.

I want to step back at this point and make an observation about this focus on the "timing" of Jesus' proclamation—and how it fulfills God's foreordained plans. Human beings have a strange relationship with time. C.S. Lewis once wrote,

Do fish complain of the sea being wet? Or if they did, would that fact itself not strongly suggest that they had not always been, or would not always be, purely aquatic creatures? Notice how we are perpetually surprised at Time. In heaven's name, why? Unless indeed there is something in us which is *not* temporal.¹

Every kingdom, empire, nation, or state—no matter how powerful—exists under the tyranny of time. And the passage of time, and the unknowability of what time will bring with it, creates a subtle, though real, anxiety and despair. Anxiety, because we cannot control time, nor control what time will bring. Despair, because we cannot stop time, or hold onto all that time will take. In time, all that we love and hold dear will fade away.

The Good News about the reign of God, that Jesus announces, however, has a very different relationship to time. God's kingdom is not *under* time, but it rules *over* it. Like the unfolding pages of an author's book, time is simply God's way of unfolding His purposes and plan.

- Jesus' birth happened "at the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4).
- Jesus' ministry, began when "the time was fulfilled" (Mark 1:15).
- Jesus' death, will not happen an hour before its appointed time: "they were seeking to arrest him, but no one laid a hand on him, because his hour had not yet come" (John 7:30).
- Jesus' return will happen at the exact hour the Father appointed: "Concerning the day or that hour, no one knows ... but only the Father" (Mark 13:32).

And lest we should think all this means is that God waits for the right timing to take action—the way one waits for the right season to take a vacation. In Acts, Peter explains that the appointed time for Jesus' death, unfolded according to God's foreordained plan:

Truly in this city there were gathered together against your [God] holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever **your hand and your plan had predestined to take place** (Acts 4:27-28).

Now, this is a mystery beyond our understanding, that God is a being who exists outside of time, and that time is therefore His creation, moment by moment. But the longer you live in this world under the *tyranny* of time, the sweeter this news, that God *reigns* over time, becomes:

1. Under His Sovereign Control

It means things are not out of, but under, control. You can feel the sweetness of God upholding your life, moment by moment. The events of your life are not random or ultimately controlled by evil or negligent people. They are *under the reign* and according to the *plan* of God. "In your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them," said David

(Psalm 139:16). And the fact that *you* cannot ultimately control your life is an anxiety assuaged by these other words of the Psalmist: “My times are *in your hand*” (Psalm 31:15).

2. Permanence

And God’s reign over time also means that everything you love doesn’t have to finally go away. There is such a thing as permanence. Those people, memories, songs, ideas, stories, and joys that are part of God’s kingdom, will last, forever. Under the rushing river of time, which seems to sweep everything away, lies the firm riverbed of God’s Kingdom. You can feel it with your feet when you are part of God’s kingdom.

The good news of God’s reign is good because it means God reigns over time and the timing of things unfolding in our lives.

At this point we might ask, just because God is in control of time, doesn’t mean my life will turn out well. *How do I know that God not only is sovereign over my days, but that in His sovereignty, my days turn out to be, gospel, good news, a good story?* This takes us from the setting of Mark 1:14-15 to the content—to what Jesus says, and does.

II. Good News:

God’s Kingdom Encounters us in the Cross, not the Sword

In our passage, Jesus links the idea of Gospel with the idea of Kingdom—the good news is news about God’s reign. We tend to think of “gospel” as a religious book, or mainly a spiritual idea. But in Jesus’ day, it was more commonly linked with a real happening, the coming of a kingdom that meant peace, liberation, and prosperity for people. So, the birth and victories of Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, are recorded on an inscription found in the ancient Greek city of Priene:

Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set [things] in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior [σωτήρ], both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things ... and ... the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good news [εὐαγγελίων] for the world that came by reason of him.²

Mark is writing in Rome, and it's hard to imagine a reader wouldn't pick up on the comparison Mark is making between the "gospel of Caesar" and the "Gospel of God;" the kingdoms created by the Caesars of the world, and the kingdom of God. The Kingdoms of man are often entered by fear, by the sword. Caesar conquered by the sword. In one instance it is recorded that Julius Caesar sold the entire population of a conquered region in Gaul to slave dealers on the spot.³ Louis XIV, who reigned 72 years,⁴ had emblazoned on his cannons the phrase, "the final rational of the king." Either bend the knee or else. I met with the archbishop of Egypt last week, whose country is very, very old. He told me of a time when a foreign people invaded with a foreign religion. That gave locals three options: convert, pay a hefty tax, or die.

Throughout history, the way you get on the right side of a kingdom is by the sword or fear. Even today, for those of us who want to be part of the kingdom of God, fear can be at work in a more subtle way. It's the fear attached to *performance* or a sense of *worthiness*. We feel we are as "in" the kingdom of God as we are good and deserving. This *performance anxiety* is its own type of sword: live up to the standard, or else. This creates a culture of anxiety, competition, and lust for power—because only power makes one secure. But the good news about God's reign is that it is not the fear of the sword, but the grace of the cross, that brings the kingdom to us.

We cannot appreciate the gospel Jesus brings unless we are viewing Jesus from the vantage point of the cross. The cross is the decisive victory of the kingdom, which is announced as good news today. On the cross, Jesus pays the ransom for us. The debt we owe for squandering Eden, choosing our way instead of God's, perpetually making light of God's glory—and a million other acts of neglect—, Jesus pays for us through his perfect life and sacrifice: "a ransom" for us (Mark 10:45). And the just penalty for our sins, Jesus endures on the cross: as the Great Passover sacrifice, his blood is "poured out" as an offering for us (Mark 14:24).

There are at least two things this tells us about how the Kingdom of God comes upon us in Jesus:

1. Sin qualifies us

First, our sin, weakness, and failings, actually qualify us for the kingdom. Jesus says, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17).

2. God pursues us as a lover

Second, God is pursuing us because He loves us. God is not building a kingdom of mercenaries, but a kingdom of sons and daughters. God's kingdom advances by God "drawing us" to Himself (John 6:44; See Song of Solomon 1:4), not by God coercing us into service.

This creates a kingdom culture of rest, fellowship, and love—because we are already secure.

In Jesus, God not only wants us to see that He's reigning over time—over the very details of our lives. But God wants us to see that He can make the *bad news* of our lives into part of the tapestry of the *good news* of the Gospel. Finally, I want to ask how we respond to all this.

Jesus concludes his proclamation in vs. 15 with two commands, then Mark gives us an example of these commands being heeded (vv. 16-20).

III. Faithful Discipleship

Some kingdoms or nations you become part of simply by being born, by the blood in your veins. This is not the case with the kingdom of God. The mark that people in this kingdom bear is *faith*. It's a mark that you cannot at first see, as it's a mark in the heart; but you can see its fruit because the fruit of faith is discipleship.

We can see this if we notice the connection between v. 15, and vv. 16-20.

Repent and Believe: Jesus explains how we receive the kingdom with two imperatives: "Repent and Believe in the Gospel" (v.15). These are two sides of a single coin. Repentance is turning away from sin; faith is turning towards God. Repentance is admitting your sinfulness, weakness, and need; faith is recognizing God's righteousness, strength, and love—and casting yourself upon them.

Jesus' opening words are immediately followed by a personal application. In vv.16-20, Jesus walks by the lakeside of the Sea of Galilee and calls four of his disciples, Peter and Andrew, James, and John. These men leave their fishing nets and follow Jesus. To believe in the Gospel, these men must be willing to undergo an entire reorientation of life.

Jesus says here, “believe in the Gospel.” We might mistake this for believing in an idea, an event, or an outcome. We believe in Christianity because it’s a doctrinal system that makes the most sense out of the world. Or we believe in the historical reality of the events recorded in the Bible. Or we believe in what the kingdom of God can do in our world, by furthering goodness and peace. Of course, this is part of what Christians believe in. But in all these cases, we are believing in *something*, but what Jesus calls us to is believing in *someone*.

And this is more than a gift of a ticket to heaven; this is the gift of true life. It takes time to “put on” this new life (Ephesians 4:24). Perhaps you might think of being gifted a violin—it’s a wonderful gift, it’s yours, but you’ll need to learn how to play to really enjoy it. But the more you learn that violin, the more wonderful the gift becomes. In the case of your life with Christ, *you’re the violin*; In Christ, God gives you, you—your true self. And it takes time to put this on, to learn what it means to live unto God.

A life of faith is discipleship to Jesus. We begin to taste the goodness of the kingdom when we engage in following the King.

Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the Good News of God’s Reign. And through Mark, through the hearing of these words, Jesus is proclaiming this to you, too. *Are you part of a kingdom that will stand through time? Do you have a King whose love for you is extended through grace?* There is such a King, Jesus Christ, and his offer of his Father’s kingdom is, indeed, good news. By putting your trust in Christ, and by giving him your sins and weakness, you can enter that Kingdom today.

And, from this day forward, unwrap more and more, and discover ever deeper riches, of the Gift God has given to us, through the Gospel of His Son.

Endnotes

1. C.S. Lewis in Sheldon Vanauken, *A Severe Mercy*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1979) p. 90.
2. Cited in Craig Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel.” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000): 67-81.

3. Wikipedia. 2022. "Slavery in ancient Rome." Wikimedia Foundation. Last modified September 21, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome.
4. Louis XIV, also known as Louis the Great or the Sun King, was King of France from 14 May 1643 until his death in 1715. His reign of 72 years and 110 days is the longest recorded of any monarch of a sovereign country in history.