

**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.”**

**(Mark 1:14–15)**

## Introduction

Several weeks ago, many South Africans were tensely frustrated, even angry, as we awaited word as to whether President Jacob Zuma would be removed from office. Many of us desired a new king, namely Cyril Ramaphosa. The currency market anticipated such good news. Once it was announced that we had a new State President, celebrations began.

For many, this announcement caused elation because of hope that their lives would be much better. A new reign had begun, and new optimism had ensued.

This is often the case in the aftermath of a political election. But such joy is merely a shadow of the joy that Mark was celebrating when he wrote, “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.’” The good news that Jesus preached was the gospel of the kingdom of God. God’s rule had come! But what does this mean?

We are moving slowly in our study of Mark 1 because foundations are important. This is particularly true of this study as we examine a mere two verses. These verses must be understood if we will understand the rest of what Mark has written.

Verses 14–15 give us the simple information that, after John the Baptist was put in prison, Jesus began his public ministry of preaching the gospel of God. What was this good news that he heralded? “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.”

Fundamentally the good news is that God is King. And with a King comes a kingdom. God’s rule has come and therefore the world will be ordered as God originally intended it to be. Let me put it this way: *The gospel of the kingdom is the good news that God has not, and he will not, give up on a world that deserves to be given up on.*

## The Gospel Has a Context

As we study these verses, it is important to understand a threefold context.

## The Historical Context

The historical context is stated simply: “Now after John was arrested” (v. 14). This phrase sets the temporal context for when Jesus Christ, the Son of God, began his public proclamation ministry. He began his ministry in a context of conflict. As Edwards comments, “The arrest of John and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry are intentionally correlated to show that the gospel is proclaimed and known in adversity and suffering, not in ease and comfort.”

The mention of John’s arrest is significant, as we will see, though no details at this point are given. This brevity of information, says France, is because “John himself is no longer in focus, and to delay over the details of his story at this point would distract attention from his successor, who now takes and will retain, his place in centre stage. The role of the forerunner is over; the time of fulfilment has come.”

But before we consider John’s arrest, we need to step back a bit further into the historical context and understand the overall political climate at that time.

One reason that so many Judeans and Jerusalemites were coming to Jordan to be baptised by John was because, under the providence of God, that part of the world was experiencing something of what might be called “messianic fever.” In fact, Jesus will mention this towards the end of his ministry (13:5–6). Those of Jewish descent were anticipating a time of new beginnings, a time when the prophesied “new age” would begin. I do not mean “New Age” in the weird, esoteric way that we tend to think of it, but as the Old Testament prophets proclaimed it – scripturally sane and down to earth. The new age was the era when God’s kingdom would come with the arrival and anointing of David’s greater Son to rule as King (see 2 Samuel 7:8–17). In Cole’s words, “God’s reign upon the earth, a concept familiar from the prophets, was about to begin.”

In Nathan’s prophetic message (2 Samuel 7), the promise was made that God would give his people rest from all their enemies (v. 11). In Jesus’ and John’s time, no enemy was greater to the nation of Israel than Imperial Rome.

Rome, of course, ruled the world in those days. They tolerated the Jews and Judaism, but only barely. They allowed them some freedom – including religious freedom – but expected all to recognise Caesar not only as king, but also as lord. The fact that Jews would not do so got up the noses of Rome and they increasingly put a stranglehold on Israel.

The Romans also taxed the nation heavily and claimed ownership of what the Jews viewed as *their* holy land. Frankly, the nation of Israel was tired of being oppressed. They were tired

of waiting for their King. They wanted their King, and they wanted him now! Or, so they thought.

With this angst in the air, they heard about a man dressed rather strangely, who was proclaiming a spiritually radical message. Most confused this with a politically *revolutionary* message. No doubt, many confused John the Baptist with one of the well-known group of Jewish political Zealots who sought and plot to overthrow the Romans. But as the crowds would come to realise the kind of King that Jesus *was*, their loyalty would fade as their hostility grew.

This should help us to understand the climate in which this good news of the kingdom of God broke forth throughout the land. The nation was excited that their enemies were about to get their just deserts. What they failed to grasp was that the King who had come would expose the enemy among their own people. This would become gruesomely clear on Golgotha's hill three years later.

But back to the present text: John the Baptist was a countercultural individual. He dressed strange and his dietary habits seemed a bit odd, but, more importantly, his message was one that cut across the accepted religiosity of the day. John the Baptist was not interested in numbers for numbers' sake. Yes, he desired multitudes to be converted—to repent, confessing their sins and sealing their profession in the Jordan waters of baptism—but he would not compromise his message for the sake of a crowd. He sought to honour God and therefore he preached the subversive—yes, *subversive*—message that God gave him.

John's message at Jordan was *subversive* to the corrupt religious system of the day. He was not afraid to call a serpent a serpent, and he did just that. He was not hesitant to publicly undermine the hypocrites.

But further, John knew who the ultimate King was—and that it was not Herod. It was for this reason that he was willing to confront this earthly king, which, quite literally, cost him his head (6:14–29).

The world will tolerate a naysayer for a while; it will put up with a firebrand for a period. But, eventually, the novelty wears off and the axe falls. So with John the Baptist. He confronted Herod one too many times and “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” played out to the early demise of his life. But thankfully, this was not the end of the story. For when John was arrested, it became the temporal cue for Jesus to begin his ministry. The nation of Israel was merely removing one subversive to make way, unwittingly, for the ultimate subversive: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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The message that John the Baptist preached was countercultural, but the message that Jesus preached was exceptionally so. He came to bring in a new era, a whole new world. He came to inaugurate the kingdom of God. You don't get any more radical or countercultural than that.

We have a hint of this in the passage immediately preceding this, as well as one that soon follows (vv. 21–28). Jesus confronted, and was confronted by, the usurping king of the world and he conquers.

Yes, the *King* had come. And this was good news; this is what Mark refers to as “the gospel of God” that Jesus was proclaiming. And, in v. 15, the nature of this gospel was revealed: “the kingdom of God is at hand.” The kingdom had come. God's rule had arrived.

## The Geographic Context

Jesus grew up, of course, in Nazareth of Galilee (v. 9). In one sense, therefore, this was the logical place for him to begin his public ministry of proclaiming the gospel of God. He would soon experience rejection among his own people for, as he himself would say, a prophet finds no honour in his own country (6:4).

Yet it also a bit strange that Jesus would not head straight to the city of kings, the city of Jerusalem. Instead, he remained in Galilee – a place somewhat off the beaten path of the place of kings. But to those who understand the nature of God's kingdom, this makes perfect sense.

Jesus did not come initially or primarily to establish political rule. That will come one day, but he came first to rule over those whom he would redeem (10:45). He knew what was in man (John 2:23–25) and therefore knew that the Jews would want to make him king over *others*, but not over *them*. He was therefore deliberating avoiding the city of kings. He would only head there when the time drew near for him to be crucified (10:1ff). In the meanwhile, he would lay the foundation for his kingdom in exile. Then, and only then, would he, the true Israel, go to the city of kings to become King in space-time history.

This is the thrust behind the historical events surrounding palm Sunday. When Jesus travelled into Jerusalem on the donkey, the people proclaimed him as King. Yes, they would crucify him only days later, but as he entered the city, they recognised him as their King.

## The Covenantal Context

In v. 15, we read the first recorded words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel: “The time is fulfilled.”

The plotline of biblical history, from the very beginning, is about God's kingdom. At creation, the Creator established his kingdom and his rule. His intention was always to rule through rulers—humans made in his image. Humans were created to be in relationship with God, to be his representatives, and to rule on his behalf. In a sense, Mark picks up where Adam and Eve failed.

As we saw in vv. 2–3, the beginning of the gospel did not actually begin right of Malachi. Rather, it began long ago, and the entirety of the Old Testament pointed to its beginning in Jesus Christ. In other words, everything left of Matthew prepares us for this good news. These first words of Jesus remind us of this, and it is an important reminder.

It is important because it means that the gospel is not a novel idea that ebbs and changes with the times. The gospel is not a philosophy of the current zeitgeist. As Inge wrote long ago, "he who marries the spirit of the age will find himself a widower in the next." Since the gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of God's long-term purpose, we know that what we believe has a credible track record.

These words, to most Gentiles, would have been strange, but not to a Jew. The Jewish people had been waiting a very long time for the establishment of God's kingdom. Granted, most Jews had erroneous ideas about the nature of this kingdom, but they were nevertheless awaiting God's Messiah, who would knock heads and bring in the kingdom. This was the new age of which the prophets spoke. According to the proclamation of Jesus, this time had come. But even though "the time is fulfilled," an equally important matter, and an equally vital part of his message, was that the people needed to be faithful, as evidenced by repentance and belief. As God had warned this chosen nation long ago, the King was coming, but would they be ready? Would they be willing to follow? As Mark's Gospel will reveal, most of the nation was not ready.

## The Gospel of the Kingdom is Centred on Christ

This gospel of the kingdom—the good news that the kingdom of God had come—was the gospel of God. It was God's good news. It was his initiative. And it began with the baptism of Jesus, when "God ... publicly install[ed] his Son as King in his Kingdom. From now on Jesus would speak and act publicly with authority and majesty" (Ferguson). And his initial authoritative action was to herald loudly the good news that God's rule and reign had arrived.

As we have seen, this good news—this gospel—is found in Christ, for the kingdom of God is inseparable from him. The kingdom of God was embodied in him. When he said, "the kingdom of God is at hand," this is exactly what he meant. With one's hands, the kingdom

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of God could be “touched.” When Jesus told an enquirer that he was “not far from the kingdom” (Mark 12:34), he meant that quite literally. Since Jesus is the King, to have *him* was to be a subject of his kingdom. To have the King in your life is to have the Ruler in and over your life. And that, my friend, is very good news! But to receive the King, for this to be good news to us, we must obey his mandated conditions. The King rules, and he makes the rules. We need to keep his rules if we will enjoy his rule. What are these rules? The last phrase tells us.

## The Gospel of the Kingdom Demands a Response

Because the kingdom had arrived, a response was called for: “Repent and believe in the gospel.”

The way that Mark presents this proclamation of Jesus gives the sense of urgency. Yes, the kingdom of God was at hand—but it wouldn’t always be. The hearers needed to respond while they could. “The appropriate response,” says Wessel, “is repentance and faith. There is an urgency about the nearness of God’s kingdom. Since it ushers in the end, it speaks of judgment. Jesus thus proclaims God’s kingdom so that men will repent and believe.”

All this good news means nothing to the person who does not participate in it; it means nothing to the person who refuses the source of this good news; it means nothing to the person who refuses the King. But, to those who heed this good news, to those who embrace the source of this good news, to those who bow the knee to the King of kings, it is gloriously great news!

## Far as the Curse is Found

It has often been said that the kingdom of God is “the rule of God in the heart of man.” I don’t have a quarrel with that, as far as it goes. But the problem is that it does not go far enough. For when Jesus spoke of the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 24:14, and here), he was thinking not merely in individualistic terms but also in cosmic terms. Jesus came to turn the *world* right side up. Of course, it must start with the individual, as Jesus seems to indicate here, but we must not lose sight of the reality that Jesus will use his subjects to extend his rule far and wide, beyond merely themselves. But, first things first.

## Repent

The offer of the kingdom of God is an offer of grace. And in keeping with the biblical pattern of grace and obligation, Jesus commanded repentance as a necessity for this kingdom blessing. “The gracious activity of God evokes and demands an appropriate response from

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humanity” (Edwards). That is, it demands heart committed to head in a radical new direction.

The word “repent” means to have a change of mind, which results in a change of behaviour. But what precisely does Jesus want us to change our mind and our manner about? Simply, about who is king. And it is not us.

## Lordship Salvation

The call to repentance is a call to submission to the sovereign and saving rule and reign of God over all lives. Specifically, it is the call to submission to King Jesus. And this submission is in all areas of life. As someone has said, to repent means to live as though as the King is present.

The gospel of the kingdom is a *comprehensive lordship* issue. The term “lordship salvation” sums it up neatly. This simply means that, when someone is converted, they receive and rely on the *Lord* Jesus Christ as their *Saviour*. In other words, they take seriously the opening words of Mark: “Jesus Christ, *the Son of God*.” He is Lord, not merely a life-saver. He is King, and so he makes the rules; he makes the demands. His subjects gladly bow the knee to him.

## Lousy Lords

We make lousy lords, and the history of our lives and of the world bear this out. We make a mess of things. And so Jesus Christ, the Son of God, tells us to change our minds about who’s the boss. And with change of mind comes a change of lifestyle. But this raises a couple of questions.

First, why should anyone take Jesus seriously?

Consider that perhaps only a few people saw Jesus baptised, and there is nothing in any of the Gospel records to suggest that anyone but Jesus heard the approving voice of heaven. So, when Jesus began preaching and authoritatively announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand, many would have thought, “Who is this? Why should we believe him?” But what follows in Mark’s story provides the answer to those questions. As English notes, “His ministry will demonstrate in what way God is now sovereign.”

Clearly, Jesus is the Son of God. Clearly, something unique was happening here. It appears indeed that a new era had begun. After all, demons were fleeing, the lame were being healed, lepers were being cleansed, lives were being transformed, and truth was being declared with undeniable authority. Truly, he must be the Son of God!

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Therefore, the signs of his Sonship are important. It is also why these signs do not need to attend today's proclamation of the Word, for we have a far better sign: an empty tomb. The cross and the empty tomb are all the signs we need.

Second, if the kingdom of God had come, why would these Galileans need to repent? Should the call to repent not rather be made to the Romans? After all, it was the Gentiles who, throughout history, had mistreated God's chosen nation of Israel. Surely *they* must repent – not the Jews. Right? Wrong!

In fact, it was this very skewed view of the kingdom of God that many Jews needed to repent of. The kingdom of God was never about one-upmanship, and it was never about political victory. It was always about God's people under God's rule in God's place (Goldsworthy). "Galilee appropriately symbolizes God's people in bondage, to whom the light of salvation would first come" (Cole). Israel in Galilee needed to repent—just like many religious "Galileans" in our own country.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of the day when Jesus would commence his ministry in Galilee: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shone" (Isaiah 9:1–2). They were in the shadow of death, not primarily because of their political subjugation, but because of their *sinfulness*. When you study the Gospels, the book of Acts, and Revelation, it becomes clear that Israel of Jesus' day was much like Israel of the Judges: Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Why? Because there was no King in Israel. They had rejected their King – the sovereign Lord – with the ugly consequences. Further, the king they wanted was one after their own heart. Therefore, Jesus pointed to them and said, "Repent and believe in the gospel."

## Believe

What does it *mean* to "believe" – and *in* what are we to believe?

Simply, as Mark uses the word (fourteen times), it means to commit to, to rely upon, to entrust oneself to. It includes intellectual persuasion, but it transcends to an affectionate and volitional response. Jesus preached that we are to turn *from* ("repent") something and turn *to* ("believe") someone. "Not only an intellectual acceptance that the 'news' is true, but a response of acceptance and commitment" (France). But what are we to *believe*?

Simply, we are called to believe *in* the gospel of Jesus Christ (v. 1). This is the good news *about* and *from* Jesus Christ. But more, the gospel *is* Jesus Christ. He is the good news. We are to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He came "not only to preach the gospel but that there might be a gospel to preach" (Grogan). The Son of God is the content of the good news, for he is the *King* of the kingdom.

In the book, *How God Became King*, N. T. Wright helpfully points out that the gospel is about more than God incarnate giving his life a ransom for many. It is that, and more, but the gospel includes the truth that God, in the person of his Son, came to rightfully take the reins of his reign! And this is gloriously good news. *The Son of God has come to rescue this world from the mess and misery of sin and to righteously rule over it in every realm.*

To believe in the gospel is to rely upon the only one who can righteously rescue and rule. It is to give up all claims to be our own king. What fools we are if we do not repent and believe!

If you had no prior knowledge of Jesus Christ, and someone read the book of Mark to you, you would wonder just how this could be good news. You may even wonder what it is that you need to repent of. But as you progressed through the book, you would see that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is holy, and this would confront you with your own sinfulness.

As you continued to hear its contents revealed, you would be confronted with the brokenness of the world and how Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fixed so many in it.

As you became exposed to its contents, you would realise that his idea of God's kingdom was radically different than that of his contemporaries. You would soon discover that even those who claimed to be the heirs of the kingdom were increasingly aggressive towards the appointed and anointed King. In fact, as you came to the end of the story, you would see that this good news became hated news – so hated that the people to whom the kingdom was offered murdered their King. Tragic. Or is it?

You see, if you listen closely to this story you will come to appreciate that it was when Christ was put to death on the cross that he actually secured his Kingship. You would realise that the cross was not an obstacle to this good news but was rather divinely designed to be part and parcel of the good news. Without the cross, there would be no crown. Without the horrific news, there would be no good news. This is radical stuff!

So, let me bring this to an essential application: To believe in the gospel is to believe in the embodiment of the kingdom of God. It is to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. *There are no benefits of the kingdom apart from belief in the King.*

When you turn from your self and your sin, as you turn to Jesus Christ, you experience just how good this is! For you experience forgiveness, and you experience being translated from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God's dear Son (Colossians 1:13).

## Application

“So what?” is a legitimate response. What does this have to do with we who live in the 21st century? It means everything, for though, in one sense, everything has changed since nearly two thousand years ago, yet nothing has changed – at least nothing that is essential to our greatest problem(s) and our greatest need and the greatest news.

Let me make three brief points of application as I bring this to a close.

First, if you are an unbeliever, repent and believe in the King. You are being given the opportunity to be delivered from a lousy lord to the Lord of lords; you are being given the opportunity to be delivered from an evil king to the holy King. Repent and believe today!

This King was crowned on the cross and coronated at his resurrection and ascension. You have every good reason to repent and believe. You have no good reason not to.

Second, if you are a believer, continue to repent and believe in the King. The first of Luther’s famed 95 theses read, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.” How true!

We are constantly submitting to the wrong rulers (desires, self, fear of others, material gods, godless worldviews, etc.). The result is that we miss out on the blessings of God’s kingdom. We need to repent of this and grow in our love for and our loyalty to the King who has come.

Turn from whatever sins are keeping you from enjoying the rule of your sovereign and saving King.

Third, having repented, and having committed to keep repenting, make sure that the gospel informs and determines your worldview. The gospel of the kingdom of God is the good news that God has not given up on a world that deserves to be given up on. It is the good news that God will not give up on his church. It is the good news that he will not give up on his subjects. And this good news must influence us not to give up on it either.

Believe God for the advancement of his kingdom in the world, in his church – including ours. Believe God for the advancement of his kingdom in your life. Pray for this. Hope for this. Proclaim this. Work for this – in the workplace, at home, in your community, as you prepare for your career, in your interactions with government, etc. Face your trials in the light of this.

God is working his plan and you are a part of it. He wants you to demonstrate his rule in your response – as you face disease, discouragements, death, cruelty, betrayal, etc. You can respond this way because Jesus did (1 Peter 2:18–25).

Keep the good news before you that God rules through his Son, and then live in such a way that his otherwise invisible rule becomes visible.

AMEN