

1 The good news of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1-15)

Welcome to this series in Mark's Gospel. We're hearing messages from Mark on Sundays at Riverview, and this series is your opportunity to take it further.

This term, we're covering the first half of Mark. There's a natural break in the middle of the book, so it will work well to pick up the second half next term (Aug/Sept).

Mark 1–8 focuses on who Jesus is. People are amazed at his authority, but they're unclear about his identity. "*Who is this?*" they keep asking. This question comes into focus as Jesus asks his disciples, "*What about you? Who do you say I am?*" Peter's response nails it: "*You are the Messiah.*" (Mark 8:29)

From that point, Mark turns to the question of what kind of Messiah Jesus will be. *Messiah* means anointed ruler, as David was in Old Testament times. But Jesus' kingship doesn't look like David's. David was celebrated for killing tens of thousands of enemies (1 Samuel 18:7; 21:11; 29:5), but Jesus is killed by his enemies. As soon as Peter declares Jesus to be the Messiah, Jesus starts talking about the cross (Mark 8:30–9:1). Our whole course next term (Mark 9–16) centres around the cross.

Mark is the shortest of the four Gospels. It was probably written before the others, perhaps in the AD 60s. All four Gospels are unsigned, but the early church said Mark wrote this book in Rome, based on Peter's memories. Almost all the events of Mark's Gospel are found in the others too, especially in Matthew and Luke.

The text of Mark's Gospel is 2000 years old, so I want to take you back to the first century, to hear it as Jesus' audience would have heard his words. Only when we understand what Jesus was saying to them can we appreciate what Jesus is saying to us.

So, each week, as you walk through that door, imagine you've entered a time machine that transports you back. Imagine you live in Capernaum, on the shores of the lake.

You know some of the fishermen. You've heard of a prophet named John proclaiming that God has sent someone to save his people. Are you curious? Want to know more?

Can you hear the expectation among the people? Can you feel their hopes and fears? Their afflictions and pain? Their faith and doubts? They identify as God's people, but it's been so long since they lived as God's nation ... hundreds of years! Mark says the arrival of Jesus the Messiah is *good news*.

Tonight we'll read the first fifteen verses, and ask seven questions:

- What does it mean to call Jesus *the Christ*? (1:1)
- What is *the gospel*? (1:1)
- Why does Mark call on the testimony of Isaiah and John the Baptist? (1:2-8)
- What message did John the Baptist proclaim? (1:4-8)
- If baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, why was Jesus baptized? (1:9-13)
- Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into temptation? (1:12-13)
- What was the gospel Jesus proclaimed? (1:14-15)

1.1 What does it mean to call Jesus “the Christ”? (1:1)

Mark's opening statement tells us what this book is all about:

Mark 1:1 (NIV)

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, [the Son of God].

This is a biography.¹ The key thing to say about Jesus is that he is the *Messiah* (NIV) or *Christ* (ESV). What does that mean?

In the language Mark used (Greek), *christos* was the word for “anointed.” Kings and priests were anointed representatives of the LORD on earth. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), the Hebrew word *messiah* was translated as *christos*. So, what does Mark mean by calling Jesus the *anointed* one?

After the exile, Jews rebuilt the temple and anointed priests. They had priests, but no king. Previously, David's descendants were anointed to represent God's reign on earth. After the kingdom fell, there was no anointed king.

Mark says Jesus is the anointed ruler they had waited 600 years to receive. Mark is telling us how this king restores the kingdom of God to the earth.

The phrase *Son of God* is present in some early copies of Mark 1:1, but not all. Did some copyists accidentally leave it out? Or did a copyist think it needed to be added? We don't know. We do know that Jesus is God's Son (compare 3:11; 15:39).

If *Son of God* is in this verse, it's parallel to *Messiah*. David's dynasty received the kingship as *sons* reigning for their *Father* in the heavens (2 Samuel 7:12-14). On coronation day, the king proclaimed God's decree: “*You are my son; today I have become your father*” (Psalm 2:7). *Son of God* meant *anointed ruler* (as in Psalm 2:2).

Don't misunderstand: I'm not denying that Jesus is the second person of the **trinity**. The doctrine of the trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three-in-one) was formulated in later centuries. Theologically, that's correct, but it's not the point Mark was making in the first century.

Christology (the study of Christ) tends to focus on the trinity. We've lost the meaning of *Christ* as Messianic king. Joshua Jipp recently did a PhD on what the term *Christ* means throughout the New Testament (500+ times). He says:

Mark's Gospel depicts the Messiah as God's Son who inaugurates and establishes God's reign through his life, suffering, and death on the cross. Jesus is triumphant in his war against the realm of the demonic, provides compassionate benefactions for the people, and not only serves the good of his people but even willingly lays down his life to rescue his subjects.²

Mark 1:1 calls Jesus *the Messiah*. This is *good news* (NIV), *the gospel* (ESV).

¹ Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Baylor U. P., 2018).

² Joshua W. Jipp, *The Messianic Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 84.

1.2 What is “the gospel”? (1:1)

If the church I grew up in held a “gospel” service, they were inviting unsaved people to give their hearts to Jesus. The *gospel* was a call to personal salvation.

For others, the “gospel” is that God justifies sinners by faith. *Justification by faith* is a key part of Paul’s message in Romans and Galatians.

But if that’s what *gospel* means, then Mark’s book is not about the gospel, and Jesus did not proclaim the gospel. Mark never mentions justification. Jesus never gave an invitation for people to ask him into their hearts or to pray the prayer for salvation.

Mark believed what he was writing was *the gospel*. Some today don’t believe him. Scot McKnight put it the problem like this:

At an airport, I bumped into a pastor I recognized ... He asked me what I was writing, and I replied, “A book about the meaning of gospel.”

“That’s easy,” he said, “justification by faith.” After hearing that quick-and-easy answer, I decided to push further, so I asked him ... “Did Jesus preach the gospel?”

His answer made me gulp. “Nope,” he said, “Jesus couldn’t have. No one understood the gospel until Paul. No one *could* understand the gospel until after the cross and resurrection and Pentecost.”

“Not even Jesus?” I asked.

“Nope. Not possible.”³

The good news of Jesus the Messiah was an outlandish claim, especially if Mark was writing in Rome. Everyone could see Caesar was appointed by the gods to run the world. Caesar said he claimed to rule by divine right. You died if you would not say, “Caesar is Lord!”



First century coin. Face *Caesar Augustus*. Back: *Divine Julius*
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coinage_reform_of_Augustus

When Julius Caesar was murdered in 27 BC, the Senate declared him to be a god. His son Augustus became emperor, so he claimed to be the son of a god. *Anointed ruler*, *son of a god*, *Saviour*, and *Lord* were all titles Caesar claimed.

Rome used the word *gospel* to describe how fortunate you were to be in Caesar’s reign. Mark opens with the phrase used on an inscription found at Priene (Türkiye):

In an inscription from Priene the birth of Augustus is described as marking for the world “the beginning of good news,” since he has come as “a saviour who put an end to war.”⁴

³ Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, (Zondervan, 2016), 25–26.

⁴ P. Oakes, “Rome,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 816.

Mark is writing a counter-narrative, confronting the dominant political claims of his world. You could be arrested for announcing the *good news* of *Jesus* as the divinely *anointed* ruler, *the Son* raised up by God as the *Saviour* who releases the world from the reign of evil, restoring it as a kingdom of heaven.

It's for this claim that *the king of the Jews* is arrested and crucified (Mark 14:61; 15:25-32). Pilate knew it was a set up (13:10), and the officer in charge of his execution declared, "Surely this man was the Son of God" (15:39). Around the time Mark was writing his Gospel (AD 60s), many others were also killed for this gospel, including Peter and Paul.

1.3 Why quote Isaiah and John the Baptist? (1:2-8)

To declare someone as God's anointed ruler, you needed a prophet to say so:

- Samuel anointed Saul and David (1 Samuel 9:16; 16:12-13).
- Nathan anointed Solomon (1 Kings 1:34).
- Elijah, Elisha, and Jehoiada anointed kings (1 Kg 19:15-16; 2 Kg 9:3-6; 11:12).
- Nehemiah was accused of getting prophets to proclaim him king (Neh 6:5-7).

John the Baptist was the prophet who announced Jesus as king (1:7). That was dangerous, since Herod claimed to be king. John doesn't live in town where Herod can find him. He doesn't shop for clothes or food. John lives in the wild, surviving on bush tucker and making his clothing from dead camels as previous prophets had done (2 Kings 1:8). Even so, Herod catches up with John (1:14), and we know how that ends (Mark 6:14-28). Proclaiming *the good news of Jesus the Messiah* was life-threatening.

John's testimony about Jesus' kingship finds confirmation in an earlier prophet:

Mark 1:2-3 (NIV)

² As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way"—

³ "a voice of one calling in the wilderness,

'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.' "

Isaiah 40:3 promised *a voice in the wilderness*. This voice was calling God's people to prepare themselves for the LORD to come and reign over them again.

When you find an Old Testament quote in the New, check the **context**. Isaiah had just announced the exile, the end of the kingship: "*Your own flesh and blood who will be born to you, will be taken away, and they will become eunuchs [unable to bear future kings] in the palace of the king of Babylon*" (Isaiah 39:7).

Then Isaiah 40 says that after the exile they'd rebuild Jerusalem (Zion). The LORD would come to reign over them again:

Isaiah 40:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ You who bring **good news** to Zion, go up on a high mountain.
 You who bring **good news** to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout,
 lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!"
¹⁰ See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
 and he rules with a mighty arm.

This is why we use the word *gospel*. Mark used the same word found in Isaiah 40:9-10; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1 (Septuagint). That's how Isaiah 40:3 was understood in the first century. Others also called themselves *a voice in the wilderness*, most notably the community in Qumran that hid their scrolls in caves (the Dead Sea Scrolls).

In summary, the gospel is the good news that God's reign (the kingdom of God) has been restored in Jesus the Messiah, the anointed ruler, the Son who saves us from the dominion of evil and restores his Father's reign to the earth.

1.4 What message did John proclaim? (1:4-8)**Mark 1:4-5 (NIV)**

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

John was the final of prophet of the old covenant. What would *repentance and forgiveness of sins* have meant to *the whole region of Judea and all Jerusalem*?

They'd gone into exile because they refused to live under God's leadership. But God told them if they'd return to him, he would return to reign over them: "*Therefore tell the people: This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Return to me,' declares the LORD Almighty, 'and I will return to you,' says the LORD Almighty.*" (Zechariah 1:3).

Repentance meant turning from rebellion against the LORD'S authority, submitting to the LORD'S authority. This reorientation opens the way for **forgiveness of sins**. *Forgiveness* means releasing someone from what they owe you. God releases us from rebellion against his kingship, to live under his authority.

And that's what Isaiah 40 promised to a people crushed by other powers. Forgiveness meant God releasing them from oppression, restoring them to his reign: "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins*" (Isaiah 40:1-2).

If *Judea and Jerusalem* were *confessing their sins*, the nation was no longer refusing to be a kingdom of God. In asking John to cleanse them, they were preparing the way for God to come and reign over them again.

That's the best way to understand John's baptism. As the son of a priest (Luke 1:5-26), John understood the various ritual cleansings required by the Torah (e.g. Leviticus 11:32; 14:8-9, 52; 15:5-27; 16:4, 24; 17:15; 22:6). He was cleansing the nation in preparation for God's reign.

Ritual cleansing baths called *miqvot* (singular *miqveh*) were common in first century Palestine. But John's cleaning ritual was specific, preparing the people for the coming king:

Mark 1:7-8 (NIV)

⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John recognized his baptism was just a symbol. The real cleansing comes as people recognize the Messiah God sent them. King Jesus does more than a symbolic wash with water; he cleanses with the life-changing power of the *Holy Spirit*.



Steps down to the miqveh at Qumran
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

In Pentecostal circles, "baptism with the Holy Spirit" is regarded as a second blessing, separate from salvation, often associated with speaking in tongues. In the New Testament, this phrase is always used to contrast John's and Jesus' ministries.⁵ John was an Old Testament prophet performing a symbolic washing, while Jesus provides the actual cleansing for the people of God, regenerated through the Holy Spirit.

1.5 Why was Jesus baptized? (1:9-13)

If baptism was *for the forgiveness of sins* (verse 4), why was Jesus baptized?

Mark 1:9 (NIV)

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

Since we think of an individual's sins, it makes no sense for Jesus to request baptism. That's not what Mark is talking about. It's about the fallen nation: *all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him ... confessing their sins* (verse 5 ESV). *The country of Judea* had gone into exile because of their sins (rebellion against God's leadership). Six hundred years later, God had not restored them as his kingdom. Now the whole country of Judea and the capital were collectively confessing they'd resisted God. They want to live under God's reign again.

It's like Daniel's prayer in exile: "*We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws*"

⁵ See Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; Acts 1:5; 11:16. 1 Corinthians 12:13 is not describing Jesus' ministry (baptizing us with the Spirit); it's about the Holy Spirit baptizing us into the Messiah as his corporate presence.

(Daniel 9:5). Daniel wasn't speaking of his personal sins; he was asking God to forgive and restore his nation.

As their God-appointed king, Jesus was identifying with the failures of his suffering people, taking responsibility for the sins of his people. By the end of Mark's Gospel, we will see Jesus doing exactly that: carrying in his own body the sins of his people.

But Jesus doesn't tell his people he is king. He joins the queue like everyone else, waiting to be baptized on their behalf. He identifies with his fallen people, taking their failure on himself.

Jesus was not very good at promoting himself. Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great did a much better job of telling everyone who was ruling the known world. Violence and oppression comes from people grasping power.



Traditional site of John's baptism, Jordan River, Judea.
Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

Jesus takes the more difficult path, waiting for God to give him the kingship. People will reject him, giving him a humiliating, torturous death. He trusts God to raise him up over all the peoples of the earth. Power is given by God, not taken by humans.

So Jesus joins John's queue. He identifies with his fallen people. He waits for God to reveal the authority he is to receive as the Messiah, the Son of the heavenly sovereign:

Mark 1:10-11 (NIV)

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ And a voice came from heaven:

“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

The God who spoke to his people through his prophets (Isaiah, John the Baptist) has taken the extraordinary step of speaking directly from heaven! This voice is the ultimate testimony Mark presents to support *the good news about Jesus the Messiah*.

Jesus is the beloved Son to whom God has given the kingship. If the Son is pleasing to the Father, all who come to life in him live in pleasing relationship with Father also.

1.6 Why did the Spirit lead Jesus into the wilderness? (1:12-13)

Mark 1:12-13 (NIV)

¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, ¹³ and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

Does the Holy Spirit lead us into temptation? Jesus' brother tells us that *God does not tempt anyone*. (James 1:13).

Again, the problem comes when I treat the text as all about me. Jesus has just been anointed as the Christ appointed by heaven to lead his people. *The Spirit descended on him like a dove* (1:9) with the accompanying declaration by his Father (1:10).

It's as the leader of God's people that Jesus faced the enemy on behalf of his people. Straight after David was anointed as God's chosen leader (1 Samuel 16), he faced Goliath on behalf of his people (1 Samuel 17). After the exile, as they were ruled by kingdom after kingdom, the Jews realized there was an Enemy behind their enemies, The Hebrew word for enemy is *śā·ṭān*. This *Śā·ṭān* wanted to keep God's people oppressed to prevent God bringing salvation to the world through them (e.g. Zechariah 3:1). The Spirit led Jesus into the confrontation with this Enemy.

When rulers fight each other for power, they're serving Satan. To be human is to reflect God's image to the world (Genesis 1:26-28), but warring rulers who take power by force are more like wild beasts. That's how Daniel saw them as he heard that one day the heavenly sovereign would take power from the *beasts* and give it to someone like a *son of man* (Daniel 7:1-14).

The son of man is Jesus (Mark 2:10, 28: 8:31; 38; 9:9, 12, 31 etc). But what happens when someone like a human is *led into the wilderness* where *the wild beasts* rule by tearing their prey apart? Will this story end badly? Will the Enemy kill him?

Jesus is not alone in this fight. Heavenly messengers (*angels*) attend him. As Jesus faces the wild beasts, he has the support of the heavenly realm.

That's the reason Jesus does not fight against the rulers appointed by Rome. Herod ruled Galilee. Instead, Jesus withdraws: *after John was put into prison, Jesus went into Galilee* (1:14). For Jesus, Herod was not the enemy—merely a tool of the Enemy. Flesh-and-blood people are never our enemy (Ephesians 6:12). There's no point trying to bring Herod down when the good news is that God has anointed Jesus to reign.

1.7 What was the gospel according to Jesus? (1:14-15)

Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)

¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the **good news** of God. ¹⁵ “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the **good news**!”

What is *God's gospel* (verse 14)? What good news announcement is God making for the world? We don't often talk about *God's gospel*, but the New Testament does.⁶ Paul speaks of *God's gospel* as the good news God promised through prophets like Isaiah, the good news that a physical descendant of David would bring heaven's reign

⁶ See Mark 1:1; Romans 1:1; 15:16; 2 Corinthians 11:7; 1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8, 9; 1 Peter 4:17.

back to the earth. God's good news was his declaration that he'd placed his Son in power by raising him from the dead (Romans 1:1-4).

God's gospel is the message God spoke at Jesus' baptism, that Jesus is the beloved Son who pleases his Father, empowered by heaven to reign in the earthly realm (1:11).

The kingdom of God (verse 15) is Jesus' main message.⁷ But Jesus never claims the kingship for himself. He receives it by his Father's declaration: *the good news of God*.

If *the kingdom of God has come near*, it's because the king has come near. After 600 years with no king, *the time had come* because the uncrowned Messiah was right there.

Jesus calls them to **turn and trust the good news** (verse 15):

- **Repent** means to reorient, to turn from resisting to recognizing God's authority. The kingdom fell when they rejected God's reign (2 Kings 17:14-20; 21:10-16). For the kingdom to be restored they must turn and recognize the king God has given them.
- **Believe the gospel** means to trust God's good-news proclamation that his anointed (his *Christ*) is our ruler (our *Lord*), that in his leadership the earth has been restored as a kingdom of heaven. To believe the gospel is to trust God's Christ to lead us, to give him our allegiance.⁸

In recent centuries, Christians have divided over what *the kingdom of God* means. Some think God's kingdom is already here. Others think the kingdom of God won't arrive until Jesus returns to reign. The truth is it's "already, but not yet." The kingdom is already here because the king is here, but the kingdom is not fully here yet because not everyone recognizes his kingship.

The important question is not "When is the kingdom?" but "What is the kingdom?" It's the reign of heaven, being restored to earth in the Messiah. For all who recognize God's Christ as our Lord, the kingdom has come near.

1.8 Conclusion

From the first fifteen verses of Mark's Gospel, we asked seven questions. Did you find this a useful way to clarify your understanding of what the text was saying? Has this approach given you more insight into Jesus' baptism and anointing, and God's proclamation of the gospel that he has appointed his Christ as our Lord? Are you making sense of the gospel Jesus proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come near? Is this how you have always understood *the gospel of Jesus the Messiah* (1:1), or is Mark's account of the kingdom of God arriving in him reframing the gospel for you? What is still unclear for you?

⁷ See Mark 1:15; 3:24; 4:11, 26, 30; 6:23; 9:1, 27; 10:14-15; 23-25; 11:10; 12:34; 14:25; 15:43.

⁸ See Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King* (Baker Academic, 2017) and *Gospel Allegiance: What Faith in Jesus Misses for Salvation in Christ* (Brazos, 2019).

There's so much more in the Gospel of Mark about the authority God has given to Christ Jesus, and his unique, sacrificial leadership changes life on earth. Mark Keown from Auckland gives us this taste of what Mark will serve up in the coming chapters:

Mark's Gospel is a fast-moving presentation of the life of Jesus. Mark does not focus on Jesus' childhood, and instead launches his story with John the Baptist—the prophets are back. Jesus emerges to be baptized by John, anointed as the Servant King. The agenda is declared in Mark 1:14–15; “the kingdom of God” is breaking in. Israel and the world are summoned to repent and believe. Jesus then launches into ministry, gathering an assortment of young men to be his disciples. They join him, likely in the hope that Jesus will lead them to liberate their nation from Roman rule. Through the first half of Mark, Jesus enacts the kingdom, inviting his disciples and people to recognize his kingship. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses Jesus' messiahship, the turning point of the gospel. From this moment, Jesus teaches them what kind of Messiah he is and what it means to be a subject of the kingdom. The disciples struggle to grasp that he is a humble servant who must die to bring redemption. They grapple with what the life of a person in this kingdom should look like—a life of cross-bearing love. The gospel climaxes with the horror of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and death. It ends with his disciples nowhere to be seen and the women at the tomb bewildered and fearful. What has happened? Who is this man? It is clear Mark knows, and his readers are challenged to come to their own conclusion.⁹

In preparation for next week, please **read Mark 1:16–2:12**.

⁹ Mark J. Keown, *Discovering the New Testament: An Introduction to Its Background, Theology, and Themes: The Gospels & Acts*, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 1:128.