

# “Repent and Believe”

## The Fourth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

*Texts: Mark 1:14-20; Isaiah 61:1-11*

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Jesus is the true Israel. Jesus made the perfect exodus into the wilderness, seeking only to do his Father’s will. Jesus never complained about his hunger or his thirst, nor did Jesus ever doubt that his Father would do as he promised. Having humbly submitted to the baptism of John, the heavens were torn open and Jesus received the Holy Spirit. Jesus heard his Father’s benediction, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” Immediately, we are told, the Spirit directed Jesus to go even deeper into the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. And while Mark doesn’t tell us that Jesus was victorious over Satan—something we learn from the gospels of Matthew and Luke—Mark does tell us that once Jesus emerged from the wilderness he began preaching about the kingdom of God and calling disciples. And this is the sure sign that Jesus has triumphed over Satan.

We continue our series on the Gospel of Mark. We have completed our study of the prologue of this gospel (the first thirteen verses) in which Mark lays out those things we need to know so as to understand the messianic ministry of Jesus which subsequently unfolds in the body of the gospel. In the prologue (introduction) Mark tells us that John the Baptist’s appearance in the wilderness not only fulfills the prophecies of Isaiah and Malachi about an Elijah figure who would appear in the desert and who would prepare the way for the Messiah, but that when John appeared, God’s long-suffering patience with Israel had come to an end. We know this to be the case because John’s preaching centered in a call for Israel to repent and to turn back to YHWH. And John’s baptism in the River Jordan is said to be for “the forgiveness of sins.” That John appeared in the wilderness looking and sounding like a new Elijah and that he baptized in the Jordan were not accidental. These were the sure signs that God’s four-hundred year silence was over. The messianic age was about to begin. The people of Israel certainly thought this was the case, Mark tells us, since people from all over Israel were flocking out into the desert to hear John preach. Clearly, something was up. The Messiah is about to appear.

Those who listened carefully to John knew that his preaching centered not upon himself, but on someone to come after him. Mark summarizes John’s message as follows: “*After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*” When Jesus made his way into the wilderness to be baptized by John, the time had come for Jesus to begin his public ministry. And even though Jesus had no sins of his own to confess, Jesus humbly submitted to John’s baptism so as to identify with God’s people, those whom Jesus would shortly baptize in the Holy Spirit. The contrast between the two men is stark. John baptized in water. Jesus will baptize in the Holy Spirit. John is the herald, or forerunner. Jesus is the reality. John’s ministry will soon come to an end. Jesus’ ministry is now about to begin.

As the gospel begins to unfold in verse 14 of Mark 1, Mark recounts that Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee. Thus the initial phase of Jesus’ messianic ministry is now underway and centers upon two things, Jesus’ preaching about the kingdom of God and his call of disciples.

In terms of the overall structure of Mark’s proclamation of the good news about Jesus, there are two phases of Jesus’ ministry in that area surrounding the Sea of Galilee. The first phase runs from Mark 1:14-3:6 and deals with the opening phase of Jesus’ messianic ministry. The second phase runs from Mark 3:7-6:13 and deals with many of the parables Jesus told about the kingdom of God and includes the

account of a number of our Lord's miracles, which clearly demonstrate that Jesus is the Son of God. In Mark 6:14, Jesus leaves Galilee before making his way to Jerusalem, as recounted in Mark 8:31 ff. This initial phase of Mark is primarily concerned with events surrounding Jesus, his family and his disciples.<sup>1</sup> In this phase of Jesus' ministry we meet the main characters in the story which follows.

In his direct and vivid manner, Mark bluntly informs us in verses 14-15, "*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!'*" As is typical of this gospel, Mark has packed a number of very important things into a few words and we must now unpack these two verses a bit, since they tell us so much about the opening phase of Jesus' ministry, as well as set the stage for the increasing conflict which follows and which ultimately takes our Lord to Jerusalem.

According to Mark's account, Jesus did not begin his messianic ministry until John the Baptist was arrested by Herod. The implication is that Jesus has waited for this event, before beginning to preach the good news of God. While our attention is quite naturally drawn to the fact of John's arrest—a significant event in its own right and which is explained in much more detail in Mark 6:14-29—it is what Mark *doesn't say* which should occupy our immediate attention. After receiving the Holy Spirit at the time of his baptism, the blessed Spirit led Jesus deeper into the wilderness where he was tempted by Satan. The implication is that some sort of cosmic battle was waged out in the desert between Christ and his arch-foe, Lucifer. Yet, Mark says absolutely nothing about it. Mark does not give us any of the details of what happened, nor does he say whether or not Jesus had been victorious over the devil. But the very fact that Jesus appears in Galilee preaching the good news of God and proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand, means that Jesus has clearly defeated Satan.

Both Matthew and Luke describe some of what happened during the time of conflict. Satan tempted Jesus by asking him to turn stones in to bread—Jesus was obviously hungry. Then Satan tempted Jesus by taking him to top of the temple in Jerusalem and told Jesus to cast himself down since angels would come and rescue him. Then the devil took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, all of which would be his, if only Jesus would avoid the suffering of the cross and bow before Satan. Jesus' responded to all of these temptations by citing verses from Deuteronomy 6-8, a passage which describes Israel's time in the wilderness. The obvious conclusion is that Jesus did what Israel had not done while wandering in the wilderness when the nation constantly complained, grumbled and doubted God's promise. According to Matthew and Luke, Jesus remained perfectly obedient to the will of his father. Then, in the Book of Revelation (chapter 12), John depicts this same event in terms of a war in heaven, in which Satan is cast down to earth where he now wages war upon those who worship and serve God's Messiah. Like Mark, Matthew tells us that at some point angels came and ministered to Jesus, just as they had to Elijah. It is obvious that Jesus is the second Adam and as the true Israel, he has won a great victory. But Mark says nary a word about this.

What Mark does tell us is that upon emerging from the wilderness after the forty days had ended, Jesus began preaching the good news of God by announcing that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. This was about the same time that Herod had John the Baptist arrested because of his fears that John was going to lead a revolt against Herod's rule. But let's not miss the obvious. In order for Jesus to preach such a message, Jesus must have overcome Satan's efforts to tempt him. In fact, that Jesus began preaching

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussions in Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 29-32; Cranfield, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 13-14.

about the arrival of God's kingdom is itself one of the surest signs that Satan had been defeated. Jesus' preaching is, in an important sense, is a continuation of the victory he just won in the wilderness.

Mark is not concerned about the details of what happened out in the wilderness—something we'd be curious about. Mark is more concerned with the obvious. Jesus came preaching the good news, the sure sign that Satan has been defeated! The application we should draw from this is that Satan is not opposed by weird religious ceremonies, by reciting prayers, or through the demon-binding mumbo-jumbo of so much of modern Pentecostalism. Our weapon against the devil is the same weapon Jesus used on him during the time of testing in the wilderness and which he began to proclaim once he emerged from the wilderness—the gospel. To oppose the devil and all his works, we must do as Jesus does and proclaim the truth about what God has done to save us from our sins! When we do so the kingdom of God is at hand! When we preach the gospel, Satan is bound.

As far as John the Baptist goes, Mark says that John was “delivered up.” The NIV correctly interprets this as “put in prison” (another way to translate this would be “arrested”) since the term is used throughout secular Greek literature of this very thing. The point that Mark is making is that the timing of John's arrest—he was delivered up—coincides with Jesus appearance in Galilee. We should not take this to mean that Jesus returned from the wilderness and simply sat around until he got news of John's arrest. Rather, John's arrest is part of God's purpose. John's ministry is transitional and is coming to an end. John has baptized the baptizer. John must decrease so that Christ can increase. And indeed, once John is arrested, Jesus begins to preach. This is what God has ordained and this is why John was delivered up into the hands of Herod, an antichrist figure and a pretender to Israel's throne.<sup>2</sup>

Mark also tells that once Jesus begins to preach, his message is very specific. In Mark 1:14, Mark says that Jesus preached the good news of God, which is then defined for us in v. 15. *‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God is near.’*<sup>3</sup> Time language is very significant and we shouldn't overlook it. When Jesus says that the time has come, he means that in his own ministry the whole course of redemptive history will enter a new and critical phase. Jesus is telling his hearers that God has directed events so that the critical moment in the redemptive drama has at long last come—God's time has come. What makes this moment different from any other moment is that God has determined to act at this particular time through this particular person—Jesus.<sup>4</sup> There is no more delay, no more days of God's long-suffering patience with his people, Israel. We should not miss the contrast Mark has made between Jesus' and John's preaching. John preached about what was *about* to come. Jesus is preaching about the one who has *now* come. Everything in redemptive history—in other words, the whole of the Old Testament—had pointed to the person who was now preaching that God's appointed moment had arrived. The Lord of history is himself telling his people that the critical hour has come.<sup>5</sup>

The very fact that Jesus opened his messianic mission by preaching the good news is itself a clear indication that Jesus is that Messiah spoken of by the prophet Isaiah in passages such Isaiah 40, 52 and

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<sup>2</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 62.

<sup>3</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 63-64.

<sup>4</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 63.

<sup>5</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 64.

61. As we read in our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah 61, the prophet speaks of one who will be empowered by the Holy Spirit bring good news to God's people. *"The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."*

When Jesus proclaims good news and announces that God's time is at hand and that the kingdom has drawn near, the words of Isaiah's prophecy are fulfilled. Isaiah was speaking in terms of covenant blessings and curses, and in verse 7, the prophet speaks of temporal blessings which point to eternal blessings. *"Instead of their shame my people will receive a double portion, and instead of disgrace they will rejoice in their inheritance; and so they will inherit a double portion in their land, and everlasting joy will be theirs."* The promise of the land points ahead to the promise of eternal life. In fact Isaiah says that the Messiah receives the covenant promise having fulfilled all righteousness. *"I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels."* Jesus has heard the words of benediction—"this is my son whom I love"—he has received the Holy Spirit. The time has come for Jesus to preach the good news, which is the means by which God's people receive the covenant blessing. Thus the one who is blessed by God (the Messiah) becomes the one through whom God blesses his people.

According to Mark (and Matthew and Luke as well) Jesus' preaching centers in declaring that the kingdom of God is at hand (or has come near). At no point in any of the gospels does Jesus define what the kingdom of God is or what its nearness means—which has been a source of seemingly endless debates among the commentators and theologians.<sup>6</sup> But we have no doubt as to what Jesus means by his reference to the kingdom drawing near. Since the Old Testament speaks of God's rule over all things, including the affairs of men and of nations, it is clear that what Jesus is saying is simply that since he has come, God's rule is even now confronting people in and through the very words Jesus which is preaching. Since Jesus has come preaching the good news about God, the kingdom of God has drawn near. As one writer puts it, in the person of Jesus, it is as though God is invading human space to secure our redemption from sin and from its consequences.<sup>7</sup> When Jesus announces the good news to Israel, he's announcing that God is doing what is necessary to save his people from their sins. Because Jesus has now come, Jesus can say the kingdom is at hand. The kingdom is present because Jesus is present.

When Jesus says that the kingdom is "at hand," we need to understand what he means. The Greek word here is *engikken* and means something like "has come near" or "draws near." Some have said it would be like saying, "the kingdom is right under your nose." The kingdom of God has come near because Christ has come preaching the good news. The kingdom is present in this sense and we will see the results of this "drawing near" of the kingdom throughout the balance of this gospel. Demons will be cast out, the blind will see, the lame will walk, the deaf will hear. But even though this is God's *kairos* moment and right time for Jesus to come and dispense covenant blessings and courses, our Lord's first advent marks

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<sup>6</sup> See the helpful discussion in Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 63-68; see also the discussion of this in Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom* (Philipsburg: P & R, 1962).

<sup>7</sup> Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 64

the beginning of the end, not the end itself. His coming means that history has entered its final phase.

This is why we must also careful to notice that the kingdom is not yet consummated—that will happen when Christ comes a second time to judge the world, raise the dead and make all things new. Yes, the kingdom has come near—but the kingdom has not yet come in all its fulness. Let me put it this way—those who are given spiritual sight can see and understand what this kingdom means and what it entails. God has come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to do what is necessary to save us from our sins. When Christ comes preaching the good news, God is extending his rule. Jesus’ own words bring life and forgiveness demonstrating God’s authority over sin and death. But such a kingdom remains hidden from those who do not have spiritual sight (unbelievers) and who are looking for God’s kingdom in sinful and unbiblical ways as the Jews of Jesus’ days were doing. They saw the coming of the kingdom in geo-political terms. Jesus will be our king. He’ll lead us to greatness. He’ll help us defeat the Romans. But this misses Jesus’ whole point about the kingdom drawing near, but not yet being fully consummated. And this is why the Jews rejected Jesus. Jesus came as a savior from sin, not a deliverer from Rome.

We make the same mistake today when we identify (or confuse) earthly things with God’s kingdom. But we cannot understand the working of God’s kingdom apart from word and sacrament. Make no mistake about, one day all of the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. But until that day when Jesus comes again, the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom, which is present whenever Christ is present through his word and through his sacraments. This is why we cannot enter, see, nor understand that kingdom, unless and until God grants us the means to do so. But because Christ has come, we are thereby assured that one day the consummation of his kingdom will come about. Because the kingdom draws near in Jesus, the final judgment will come, the resurrection from the dead will come, the re-creation of all things will come. Therefore, when Jesus preaches the good news, the kingdom of God has drawn near. And that same kingdom draws near whenever and wherever the gospel is preached. Indeed, the kingdom draws near this very morning!

**T**he other sure sign that Jesus has defeated Satan in the wilderness is that Jesus not only preaches the gospel and announces that the kingdom has come, Jesus also begins to call disciples to follow him. The true Israel begins to call a new Israel through the issuance of a divine summons.

As Mark describes the beginning of Jesus’ Galilean ministry, Jesus soon calls his first disciples who immediately drop everything to follow him. As we learn in verse 16, “*As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen.*” About 70 miles north of Jerusalem, the Sea of Galilee was twelve miles long, six miles wide, filled with fish and surrounded by small towns and villages—where many of the incidents recording in the gospels will take place. Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew were fishing, going about their business and providing for their families, when Jesus approached them. They were not unhappy as Jews, nor were they seeking something else. But since God is sovereign, the time has come for these two brothers to be summoned to another calling. Jesus walks up to them and says “‘*Come, follow me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men.*’” Mark’s description of this is brief and very vivid and has taken on itself a life of its own. Just think of the Sunday School ditty, “I will make you fishers of men” and recall for a moment how innocuous this whole fishing imagery has become throughout evangelicalism.

But think about this for a minute. Is fishing simply a metaphor for evangelism in the sense of merely telling people about Jesus? When Simon and Andrew cast their nets into to sea and caught fish to feed their families and sell some to others, what happened to the fish they caught? Were the fish saved? Were they invited into the boat? Or is there a sense in which the fish is caught against its will and then

inevitably dies under the judgment of the fisherman? Perhaps we ought to rethink this “I will make you fishers of men” thing a bit!

First and foremost, fishing is a judgment motif, not an evangelistic motif! In fact, when Jesus summons these two men to become fishers of men, he is using an Old Testament image found throughout the prophets (Jeremiah 16:16; Ezekiel 29:4 ff; 38:4; Amos 4:2; Hab, 1:14-17). In these passages God is the judge who comes like a fisherman with a net or a hook to catch those who fall under his judgment, which is the fate of the fish we catch (except those of you who are “catch and release” types). Therefore, when Jesus calls Simon and Andrew to be “fishers of men,” he’s informing them that their new calling will be like that of their new master who has just summoned them. Simon and Andrew will preach a message which summons men and women to repent. Their preaching comes upon those who hear it like fish are caught in a net. This is not a “take it or leave it” offer of salvation. This message summons us to repent and believe, just like a net pulls a fish into a boat. Once we hear it, we cannot ignore it.

Therefore, all those who hear this message—the good news of God—cannot escape God’s judgment. When we hear the declaration of what God has done to save sinners from that wrath which is to come, we are obligated to respond. All who hear that this is God’s appointed time and that the kingdom has drawn near in the person of Jesus, must now do as Jesus says, “repent and believe.” Those who are “caught” through this preaching either die to themselves so that they might live unto God, or else they die under the judgment of God. But there is no sense that you can hear this message and then just walk away as though you had never heard it. You have been summoned. You are caught. You will be judged. This is every bit as inevitable as it is that the fish will die once out of the water.

That Jesus calls men to engage in such fishing is yet another sign that the kingdom of God has drawn near. Through the proclamation of the good news, men and women throughout Israel will soon be summoned to repent and believe the gospel that Jesus will proclaim. Those who hear the words of Jesus and his disciples are just like fish caught in a net. God has them in his possession. They come under his judgment. That Jesus has this sovereign power is seen in the reaction of Simon and Andrew to Jesus’ call. Mark simply tells us in verse 18, “*At once [Simon and Andrew] left their nets and followed him.*” Simon and Andrew are still fishermen, only they no longer fish for fish. Now they fish for men and women. Jesus has other disciples to call as well. As we read in verses 19-20, “*When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.*” Those whom Jesus calls, do not resist. They follow their master because they have been summoned.

Because God’s time has come and the kingdom has drawn near, Jesus now calls his disciples to follow him. This call to be fishers of men is not some impersonal plea to “follow Jesus.” It is a direct summons by God himself, addressed to these particular men by that one in whom the kingdom draws near and through whom God fishes for men and woman. Cranfield puts it this way, Jesus’ “word lays hold on men’s lives and asserts his right to their whole-hearted and total allegiance, a right that takes priority even over kinship.”<sup>8</sup> This is what happened to Simon and Andrews and to James and John. It is what is happening here this morning. That time has come for you to repent and believe.

Beloved, because the kingdom of God has drawn near through the proclamation of this good news about what God has done to save us from our sins, everyone here this morning has been summoned to believe

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<sup>8</sup> Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 69.

the gospel and repent from our sins. We must believe that Jesus died to save us from our sins and that he was raised from the dead so that we might be declared righteous before God. We must also repent—that is we must change our minds about our present direction and turn from following our own sinful direction, cease such behavior, and then turn toward God. This is the demand of the kingdom. This kingdom has drawn near through the words proclaimed to you this morning. You have been caught in God's net. Now is the time to repent and believe the good news!