

## *Is Your Gospel the Gospel?*

### **Mark 1:1-8**

Before I heard the gospel, I thought if my life didn't change, it simply wasn't worth living. Whatever I was using to fund my sense of being OK simply ran out. I remember making resolution after resolution—but as time went on—I pretty much broke them all. Sports and school went well for me; so I got determined to exploit those skills to the max hoping that that kind of success would be the answer. Although all of that became enormously motivating and led to significant accomplishment, a sense of wellbeing and the capacity to live up to my ideals was always out of reach. In the strain of that deep disappointment and growing cynicism, I heard the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't think a soul ever soaked up a message as fast and completely as mine did. Have you ever seen that Billy Mays commercial where he advertises the Amazing Sham-Wow soaking up 20x's its weight in water? Well, that's a good picture of my soul drinking up the gospel. That God loved me, forgave me, summoned me to obey Him, gave His Presence, Spirit, and Word for whatever it was that He would call me to be was beyond my wildest imagination. It was as Peter said, "joy unspeakable." I've never gotten over it and that is one reason why I do what I do. Hitting the lottery would have been peanuts and crumbs. I suppose that is one reason why the prosperity gospel has so little attraction to me. Hearing the voice of God's love, affection, mercy, and promise — made the riches of this world insignificant compared to the riches of the gospel. I once attended a conference for pastors where the keynote speaker was telling us how God had blessed him through the power of positive confession with a new car and a home in a beautiful upscale neighborhood. During the entire presentation I was thinking, "Why has this man set the bar so low?" Why is he so interested in things that seem to have little interest to Jesus?" Does the gospel have anything to do with following Jesus? In Jesus Christ, I found forgiveness and acceptance with God. I also needed change that I knew was unattainable as long as my goals, ambitions, and desires remained at the center of my motivation. For the first time in my life I found grace to resist temptations before which I was helpless. These changes of grace, the change of knowing that we are loved and the change of being empowered to love God back and to love others transformed my life. Like most of you, I was transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light.

But, for gospel change to take place, the message of the gospel must be the message of the gospel. The good news must be good enough news. To believe in Jesus is not to believe in a Jesus on your own terms. There is no such thing as a "designer Jesus." You can't define Jesus any way you want, download that into your I-Pod, and be changed. For Jesus to change you, he must be the real Jesus. A Jesus you make up won't ever disturb you, challenge you, nor will he really amaze you. Mark tells us that if we are to discover the radical change we must come to know the real Jesus and we must come to know the real gospel. That's why Mark wrote his account of Jesus Christ. He opens it up with this, "This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God." (1:1)

**What I want to do, in the weeks ahead, is to lead us back to the primary source that tells us who Jesus is and what this gospel is.** Among all the gospels writers, Mark records this in the most essential way. I want you to ask if the gospel you have heard or are hearing is good news. Are you following Jesus? Or are you following a caricature? Are you following a Jesus on your own terms? Mark will help us know these things.

One reason I'm asking this is because so much of what I now hear in the name of Jesus or in the name of the gospel—to me—just doesn't sound very much like Jesus or the gospel. Moreover, those who do studies of such things now tell us that those who call themselves born again Christians have very different beliefs and practices than what Christians had twenty years ago. A popular bumper sticker may represent this generation of evangelicals, "Christians aren't perfect just forgiven." Now the first part is true enough but the second is not good news. If all I could expect from Jesus Christ and the gospel was to be forgiven and not changed, I simply would not have been interested. My life was a mess. I needed a capacity to change and still do. So, I want us to ask, who is this Jesus? What is this gospel? Is the gospel you believe in good enough? Be honest. Is it changing you? I'm not asking if your life is trouble free. I'm asking if your understanding of the gospel is good news?

Here's what I want to do this morning. I want give some background to the word "gospel" and then I want to consider three questions with broad strokes.

- **Who is the Gospel about?**
- **Where do you meet Him?**
- **How do you receive it?**

*First, What is a gospel?*<sup>1</sup> The gospels aren't like modern biographies. In fact, Mark is the least interested of all the other gospel writers in the personal details of Jesus' birth and life. However, Mark did write a *gospel*. He wasn't the first to use this word. Paul used it, fifteen years earlier in his letter to the Galatians. The first Christians took this word that had absolutely no religious connotation and applied it to who Jesus is and what he came to do. The Greek word for gospel is εὐαγγέλιον, euangelion (eu- "good", angelion "message"). We pronounce it *evangel*. Originally it meant the news of *an event that brought great joy*. It didn't refer to ordinary daily news, but specific history making or life shaping news. What is so fascinating about these first words of Mark is that they run parallel almost word for word to a first century inscription we have found about Cesar Augustus. It reads, "*The beginning of the gospel of Caesar Augustus*" (Priene 105.40). It tells the announcement of Cesar's birth, coronation, and reign. According to its author, it was the joyful announcement of a history-shaping event that changed everything for the better. Mark is offering different gospel or different announcement of joy. And this good news of the Lord Jesus stands in stark contrast to the good news of Caesar. I think this is Mark's point and we'll see this as we move through his gospel. What Caesar offers as good news is nothing compared to what Jesus offers. This is what Mark wants you to know.

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<sup>1</sup> See T. Keller *A Man in The Wilderness* from whom I have pilfered freely.

When the Persians invaded Greece and the Greeks prevailed in the great sea battles and the battle of Marathon, they sent runners, messengers (*euangelions* or evangelists) throughout Greece to proclaim the good news that the people would not be enslaved by the Persians. This was a gospel. It was like a historic newsflash. Something has happened in history, something has been done for you, a battle has been won, a king has come, and as a result everything has changed for the better. A gospel changes you. It changes your status and it changes your life. When the Greeks heard the good news from Marathon, how do you think they felt? They were overwhelmed with joy! Something happened in history; it was done for them and it changed their status and their lives forever. Before anything else, the message of Jesus—the gospel of Jesus—is an announcement of something gloriously joyful that has taken place in history *for you* with the call to receive it—*AS IT IS*. Are you receiving it with great joy? What message are you hearing?

OK. *Who is this gospel about?* Mark begins with three titles. Jesus, Christ, and the Son of God. Immediately Mark tells us that to receive this gospel is *not* to “Believe in Jesus.” The Gospel is, “Believe in Jesus AS HE REALLY IS!” And so Mark has given us three titles that tell us who Jesus really is. First, he gives us the name *Jesus*, which means to rescue or to save. So the gospel is about a rescue or a salvation. Now, what we are rescued from was a major stumbling block for Jesus’ disciples and the source of much confusion today. The angel told Joseph to name his son Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. Salvation is not primarily about a rescue to personal, psychological, or economic and political power and status. Yes, it has implications for all of these things. But the primary saving and rescuing is about a rescue from the guilt and dominance sin has in our lives. And this is really good news, because this is where our most significant battles are waged. Again, it has implications for liberation from all kinds of physical, emotional, and social tyrannies. Yet when our passion and attention make these other tyrannies center stage we distort the gospel and lose its focus. In the 50’s the denomination of my childhood made the *social* gospel primary and in doing so it lost its way.

The second title is *Christ*. The term *Christ* means anointed king. The real Jesus and the real gospel are about God’s anointed King who has come into the world as king. So, Mark is saying that if you receive Jesus Christ—only as Jesus—you have not received Jesus as he is. The call to accept Jesus Christ is the call to remove yourself as the drive shaft of your life. To receive the gospel is to acknowledge that, in Christ, God calls and summons us to orbit the interests and allegiances of our life around Him and no longer ourselves. To become a Christian is to acknowledge that I no longer get to call the shots. This is good news because the weight of your life and the world does not rest on you and your sufficiency. As a Christian, it now rests on Christ and his rule and reign of everything. To receive the good news is to receive Jesus as Christ or King. You can’t receive him—as he is—and continue to be your own Christ or your own king. Christianity is neither collaboration nor a democracy where you get a vote to see which way things ought to go. *It’s a monarchy where you become a subject of a new king.* Now this is counterintuitive to our political sensibilities. But the truth is that you were not made to handle life with everything orbiting around you. You just aren’t sufficient

for that position. As long as you insist on being the drive shaft of your life you will be kicking against the goads and dashing against the rocks. The good news is that a savior has come and this savior is none less than the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. To receive Him and the gospel is not to add Jesus as one more god into the pantheon of gods of your life while you remain in the driver's seat. And the beautiful thing about this is that this King is anything but oppressive. Instead of using his subjects for his own advantage, this King, as Mark says in ch. 9, "came to serve and give his life up for us." This King is full of perfect love. If we reject Jesus as Christ God's anointed king we have not received him. I'm not saying that if we have ever failed to live up to that acknowledgement we haven't received him. None of us have. Mark is saying that this acknowledgement and understanding is essential to receiving Jesus and the gospel. You can't be your own Christ and be saved. Are you trying?

Third, Mark says the good news is about Jesus *the Son of God*. Now in the Scriptures, *Son of God* can refer to angels and it can even refer to men. But in Mark, it refers to the incarnation of God among us. Son of God in Mark is the name given to Jesus when he displays attributes that only God has. For Mark, Son of God means that Jesus Christ shares the very nature of God. His miracles and life bore witness to this. To receive Jesus is to receive Immanuel or God with us. When you receive Jesus this is the Jesus you receive. This why Mark quotes Isa. 40. Because through Isa. 40, Israel came to fully expect that some day the LORD God Himself would come to Jerusalem. Mark is saying that Jesus is the LORD GOD! So, if God is with you and if God loves you, who can stand against you? If God pronounces you safe and secure, who has more power to say something else? If God forgives you and accepts you, who can say that you aren't forgiven? If God's power is in you through his Spirit, what greater resource do you need to negotiate life or to change from being entrapped in sin? Friends, that's the best news you will ever hear. This gospel and this announcement is about Jesus Christ the Son of God. It is not about Cesar, Nero, Regan or Obama with all the apparent power and influence these people have. Mark is saying there is another savior, king who is God with us. And principalities and powers, seemingly powerful people, things in heaven and things in earth, tribulations, danger by sword, or persecution cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. God has come to us. God has come close to us. God has given himself to us. Therefore it is possible to have a heart that knows that we have God and then to live under the authority and influence of that. Beloved, this is good news to hear and receive. That's who Mark says Jesus is.

The second question we are considering is, ***Where do you meet Him?*** If you are going to find this king you have to go out into the desert or the wilderness to do so. John the Baptist preached in the desert. The people had to go out into the desert to get baptized. Jesus had to go out into the desert. The desert is a place of thorns, sagebrush, and dust where nothing grows. The desert cannot sustain life. It's a place of thirst where there is no water. There's no bread in the desert. You can't till the sand and plant wheat in the desert. It's a place of thirst, hunger and loneliness. The desert can't support a community and life. Until air conditioning and irrigation no one lived in Arizona. It was simply uninhabitable. One of the themes of the Bible is that, as a rule, you meet God in the desert. Israel, Moses and Jacob all met God in the desert. Why is the desert the place

to meet God? It is so because the desert is a place *where you can't stay alive without the intervention of God*. In the desert, all the wells go dry and all your bread goes moldy. So God leads his people into the desert to worship and he then gave water from the rock to drink and manna from heaven to eat. In the wilderness you learn that God is not a nice addition to your other gods. He's not a supplement. In the desert, apart from the saving intervention of God you have no hope at all. Look beloved, most of us don't see our true dependency on God until we go through a desert experience. A desert experience is when something you have looked to as your real hope breaks down and fails you. Your real savior your real Christ is always revealed in the desert. The desert is where anything but Christ will be manifested as insufficient, hopeless, and inadequate. Ultimately all wells run dry except the water of God and all bread goes moldy except the bread of God. Has God called you to some desert? Where do you look for your real bread and water? If that runs out where do you turn? As C.S. Lewis once said, "If everything in this world doesn't satisfy you, isn't it possible that you were made for another world or perhaps another gospel?"

**Who is this Gospel about?** *Jesus Christ Son of God*  
**Where do you meet Him and His gospel?** *In the desert.*

Finally, ***How do you meet him?*** Notice that John the Baptist baptized people. As far as I know this was extraordinary. We read of all kinds of washings, oblations, and emersions in Jewish ceremonial law. Jews washed their hands before they entered the temple or the synagogue. Gentiles had to pour water over their entire bodies to enter. But have you ever read in the Hebrew Scriptures someone baptizing someone else? Ceremonial washings were a way of saying that I need to be cleansed of sin and uncleanness. It was a ritual of confession and purification of sins. This was done for centuries. But before John, you always did it to yourself. John says, "To receive this gospel you must be baptized by someone else." It doesn't matter your background, status, your religion, race, or gender. You may be a minister or a prostitute or a Jew or a Gentile. It doesn't matter who you are or what you have become. But listen carefully. By begin baptized at the hands of another John is saying that ***you must receive your fitness for this king from the hand of another.*** John says, "Now I will baptize you with water, later Jesus will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." The point is you cannot cleanse or save yourself! Here is the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. No matter who you are or what you have done you can receive your fitness for a real and eternal relationship with God from Him. You cannot merit his favor. You can't make yourself fit for this King. But, beloved, Jesus Christ can. And there could not be any better news for any of us than this. So, beloved, believe the gospel. Believe in Jesus AS He IS. Jesus is the Savior, the Christ the Son of God. You will most likely receive him in some desert where the water has run out and where your bread goes bad. You can only receive him or be made fit for him at the hands of another and that Other is the Lord Jesus Christ who is merciful and able. This gospel can change you. This gospel is really good news. And it is good enough news. Believe the gospel as it is: The unspeakable joy is that no one can ever love you like the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God.