

*Read also Psalm 2:1-12, Malachi 3:1-6, 3:16-4:3, Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20*

We begin a new year with a new study, the Gospel of Mark. We step back into first century life. What did the Kingdom of God mean to people back then? Believers knew their history and thought it was significant. The Jews had a place as allies to Rome, thus Rome appointed Herod, a Jew, to rule. But Israel did not have political freedom. But, they looked for it because they believed God had that in mind for them.

Jews were educated about their beliefs. We know this because many of their ancient books have been found near the Dead Sea (Qumran documents<sup>1</sup>). The people knew the Scriptures well. Most prophets wrote that something was missing; they were looking forward; anticipating God's future action. The last prophet, Malachi, said, "Something is to come. He will be like Elijah" (see Mal. 3:1-6).

But no prophet had spoken for years until John the Baptist showed up, and so Mark begins his gospel with this prophet, John.

Before we begin, though, we need to find out who wrote this book – who is Mark?

A bishop named Papias (60-132 C.E.) tells us. He worked in Hierapolis and was a friend of the apostle John. He wrote extensively about the early disciples.<sup>2</sup> Other important scholars (like Irenaeus and Eusebius) quote him, making him reliable. Papias said that Mark was the secretary and translator for Peter and he wrote down what the Lord said and did according to Peter's antidotes and sermons.

Mark is thought to be the John Mark mentioned in 1 Peter and Acts, whose mother was Mary, who owned the house where the disciples met for prayer.

You remember the story. Peter had been imprisoned and headed for death when an angel came, opening doors and breaking his chains, and miraculously rescued him. Peter went to John Mark's mother's house. Her servant Rhoda opened the door. (See Acts 12:12ff)

John Mark was Barnabas's cousin. Paul became very frustrated with this young man when Mark ditched him on his first missionary journey. (Acts 15:38) But later Paul requested that Mark come help him, so Mark did grow up. (2 Tim. 4:11)  
Peter affectionately called John Mark "my son." (2 Pet. 5:13)

So Mark, young but growing in the Christian faith, a Jew who was Peter's secretary, wrote this gospel. You will see Peter all over this gospel; when Jesus healed his mother-in-law; when Peter proclaimed him "the Messiah." This book also gives intimate details of Peter's denial of Jesus. Only Peter would have divulged such details. It is his inside story, and his candor teaches us many things.

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<sup>1</sup>You may have heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in caves near the community of Qumran. Nine hundred documents have been preserved.

<sup>2</sup>Papias Bishop of Hierapolis, *Interpretation of the Lord's Sayings*, C.E. 120/30.

As we explore the story, we shall see that Peter grew to understand the implications of the kingdom of God, for it is a kingdom. That is a big part of this gospel. We will grow in understanding with Peter as we study it.

Because people in Mark's time knew the Bible quite well, they were informed citizens, just like you are today. They hoped for their nation to be restored by God. That seemed far-fetched under Roman rule.

But Mark says in his very first sentence that God's kingdom transcends the world's systems. Mark was politically informed, but also spiritually informed.

Are you spiritually informed? That's very important as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Mark defined the world through Jesus. He shows Jesus breaking into history, inaugurating God's rule, and disrupting the religious and political status quo.

For Roman leaders were considered to be divine. Look at this inscription (Priene Calendar Inscription in honor of Caesar Augustus):

"Since Providence . . . has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, *sending him as a savior* both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors . . . and since the birthday of *the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world* that came by reason of him . . ." (italics mine)

This deifying of rulers had gone on for a long time.

- Julius Caesar was deified: "The manifest god from Mars and Aphrodite, and universal savior of human life." (48-44 B.C.E.)
- Tiberius was "son of god." (14-37 C.E.)
- The people erect an altar in honor of Gaius Caligula as a "new god." (around 37 C.E.)
- Claudius was deified (41-54 C.E. It was rescinded, then later reinstated.)
- Nero was called, "The good god of the inhabited world, the beginning of all good things." (54-68 C.E., about the time Mark's gospel was written)

So Mark writes: *The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*

Mark is making a political statement. It is described in Psalm 2:

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs . . . Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill."

The Psalmist then adds: "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you."" (Ps 2:2-7).

*The Beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* This is Mark's thesis statement. He sets about proving that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Anointed One of God, and the Son of God.

So he takes his readers back in history: (Mark 1:2-4)

As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus' good news begins with a prophet who comes first, shouting an emotional yet solemn proclamation; a plea that will flatten down all the obstacles and smooth the way for people to see Jesus, God's coming King.

What obstacles hinder you from seeing Jesus clearly?

Mark talks about those hindrances throughout his book because the disciples often did not understand, and Mark wants to help us see Jesus more clearly through our own hindrances and doubts, so we know the good news.

For the Jews one hindrance was the temple and its ritual worship. So John went away from the temple and that whole sacrificial system, and he called people out to the desert where there were no distractions; no rote religion. His message was simple: "repent, receive forgiveness, and be baptized. Then look for Jesus. "

People came in droves. People from all over the Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him.

Do you think people today would go out to see John should he come here?

They went out because they were scripturally informed. They anticipated that those scriptures would happen. John was the "something more." John rekindled their hope that God was coming again to save the Jewish people, as Isaiah predicted. He was the voice in the wilderness who will prepare the way of the Lord."

We can go further back in the Bible than that. This prophecy is even more ancient – because they were students of the Scriptures, they saw it.

In Exodus 23:20, God says through Moses, *I am going to send an angelic messenger in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.* This messenger went before the people of God to prepare the way for their entry into the Promised Land.

John came to prepare the way for your entry into the Promised Land of that eternal kingdom.

Are you flocking to the promise? Do you see the kingdom that lasts forever?

Following after John, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.'" (Mk 1:14b, 15).

Did you catch the good news that we are a little community who is part of that larger kingdom? It stretches all the way back to the beginning of the Bible, through years of ups and downs, of losses and gains, of temples and deserts, to this very time and place where we live in the struggles of our own political climate.

Mark calls it *GOOD NEWS* of a great kingdom! And it's just the beginning.

Our call is to begin 2012 by seeking this kingdom; allowing Jesus to define our lives and through Him, interpret the world's politics. Jesus, not Caesar, is in charge. He is our hope, and the One who we worship.

AMEN