

# A DIFFERENT KIND OF KINGDOM

## Mark 1:1–15 • Char Brodersen

Introduction: Good morning, Church! If it is your first time joining us, welcome! As many of you know, we are spending this year building out our biblical theology—seeing how the whole story of Scripture fits together and finds its fulfillment and goal in and through Jesus Christ. We are now in our final series, looking at the Story of the Kingdom. Last week, we began looking at how Matthew’s Gospel shows Jesus as the true King over the kingdom of God and how he proclaims it, he demonstrates it, he invites us into its way of life, he opens the kingdom to us through his death and commissions us to its proclamation and spread until he returns.

This morning, we want consider the Gospel of Mark and its view of the kingdom of God.

As we come to the close of the Old Testament, whether the Jewish ordering ending with Chronicles or the Christian ordering ending in Malachi, the Old Testament leaves us waiting and longing—waiting for God’s true King, waiting for his kingdom to be re-established, [waiting for the end of the exile](#), waiting for the judgment of God on sin and evil and finally for the nations to be delivered from idolatry and brought to know the one and true God.

When the curtain rises on Mark’s drama, we find that Israel is still in exile, and it would seem, at a moment of crisis. It has been years since any divine intervention or revelation, and despite God’s past favor, the people are now in a state of powerlessness, confusion, and need—they are “Like sheep without a Shepherd.” Though the nation of Israel is no longer in captivity in a foreign land, they are still under foreign occupation, without a king, without a kingdom. Israel is waiting and looking for the end of exile; they are looking for the kingdom of God. But the kingdom is coming in a way no one expects.

### I. The Beginning of the Gospel

- A. The beginning of the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. Mark uses the phrase “the beginning.” It’s a bit of a weird way to start a story—especially since he doesn’t start at the beginning of Jesus’ life like Matthew’s or John’s gospels. So why start like that? Well, this is the first of many of the shoes Mark will drop for us. This phrase, “the beginning,” is supposed to awaken echoes of the first phrase of the Bible. It’s a [hyperlink to Genesis 1](#). “[In the beginning](#) ... God created the heavens and the earth.” Mark uses the same kind of language to awaken our minds to the significance of what is happening in the person of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, a new beginning is happening—but this is the beginning of beginnings. Jesus is a new beginning to Israel’s story. But also a new beginning to the story of the whole world. In Jesus, God is rebooting the story. Think about the latest *Star Wars* movies—it’s the same old stories but subverted, right? This time, it’s not the Skywalkers, it’s Rey—but IT IS the same story being told. It’s Jedis, the dark and light side of the force in conflict, but in a new way. Jesus is the reboot. He is redeeming humanity’s story; he is picking up themes of God’s acts of salvation in the past but in a new and subverted way. And just as in Genesis where God initiated creation bringing about his kingdom reign on earth, here at this time, God is initiating a new creation and the re-establishment of his kingdom.
- B. What Mark is saying in essence is: God is taking decisive action in Jesus Christ to redeem, to save the world, and to bring about new creation.

## II. The voice who cries in the wilderness

- A. “As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,” I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way—“a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 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 wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 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. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
1. Mark attributes this quotation to Isaiah the prophet—though Jerome, an early church father, chided Mark for making this mistake. It has been pointed out that this passage, though partially being from Isaiah, is also a quotation from Malachi 3:1 and Exodus 23:20. Doesn’t Mark know his Bible? Why did he make this obvious mistake?
  2. Commentators have come up with all sorts of reasons for this, but I believe the most convincing is that Mark attributes this passage solely to Isaiah because Mark wants us to expect that his story will focus on the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision of a new exodus, the end of Israel’s exile, and the re-establishment of God’s kingly rule in Jerusalem seen in the latter half of Isaiah’s book.
  3. It’s also quite interesting to note that in reconstructions of 1st century synagogue readings of Torah—a massive two-thirds also included prophetic readings from Isaiah. The reason for this popularity is most likely because no other scriptural book offered such an extended presentation of Israel’s future hope of Yahweh’s personal coming in power to rescue his oppressed people from exile, leading his people home, and dwelling among them in a restored Jerusalem and temple to which all nations would come. So Mark is directing his gospel right at the messianic hope of Israel in the 1st century.
  4. This is so important for us to understand in order to truly grasp the weight of Mark’s Gospel because the Jews of the first century were anticipating the kingdom of God, and there were basically four distinct views about the kingdom and how it would come. With a certain over-simplification, we can easily trace the four options open to Jews in Jesus’ day for how they understood or expected the kingdom of God to come.
    - a. **The Sadducees—The kingdom without the king**
      - i. As Brian explained last week, the Sadducees were a sect of the Jewish elite who were connected both to the family of Herod and to the Levitical priesthood. They had made deals with the Romans to keep themselves in power over the nation of Israel through maintenance of the temple and temple sacrifices. They rejected any future hope for Israel’s Messiah or even the final resurrection. They had settled instead for an earthly kingdom with no intervention from God. The kingdom was all about power and control for them.
    - b. **The Pharisees—The Kingdom of the Jews**
      - i. In their earlier days, the Pharisees had sometimes been able to ally with the Jewish leaders (The Sadducees), but in Jesus’ day, they held no political position. They were more like a pressure group. Their aim went like this: when ejected from the halls of power, start a grassroots campaign to get your vision for Israel adopted by the masses, tell everyone to have their own ritual bath if they can, have your bones buried in ossuary boxes waiting for resurrection. If we can be obedient enough, get pure enough, keep Torah most accurately, then maybe the “son of David” will come. There was a Rabbinic saying that if all Israel would keep the law for just one day—Messiah would come.

c. **The Zealots—The Kingdom of David, the way of the Maccabees**

- i. The Zealots, also known as the Sicarii or Dagger-men, were a sect made up of marauding bands who attempted to overthrow Roman rule. They continually engaged in violent coups seeking to take back the kingdom of Israel through violent overthrow of their oppressors—specifically the Romans. For them, the rule was clear: say your prayers, sharpen your swords, make yourselves holy to fight a holy war, and God will give you a military victory over the hordes of darkness.

d. **The Essenes—The Kingdom of the Holy (separate)**

- i. The quietist and ultimately dualist option, taken by the writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, their stance was separate yourself from the wicked world, say your prayers, and wait for God to do whatever God is going to do—judging the wicked and rewarding the few righteous and separate or Holy.
  - (a) It is key for us to note that there were multiple political/religious groups in the 1st century in how they envisioned the kingdom of God coming into the world. And according to Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is bringing in an entirely different kind of kingdom into this world ... one that challenges each of these view points and yet invites them to repent and follow him.

III. **Mark continues with this Isaiahic theme in the next verses**

- A. Mark brings us to the baptismal waters of the Jordan where John is calling all of Israel to repent and confess their sins. John’s baptism was an invitation to the nation of Israel to be cleansed from past sin and have a new beginning. It’s this beautiful picture of Israel going back to the baptismal waters of the Jordan—like those who had come out of Egypt in the first exodus and through the wilderness. John is calling all of Israel to once again prepare to enter into the promises, to get clean and ready for the Lord’s coming, and to take up their call to be a light to the nations. Now along comes Jesus one day, and he insists on being baptized by John (found in Matthew’s Gospel). But we, the reader, already know that Jesus doesn’t need repentance; he has no sin. So what is this all about? In the baptismal waters, Jesus is taking up the mantle of Israel, taking up their story in order to fulfill and accomplish all the promises of God to Israel and to the nations. When Jesus comes up out of the water, something incredible happens: “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. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’”
- B. The words “You are my Son” are taken directly from Psalm 2—a song about God and his anointed (Messiah) king who will rule, not only Israel, but over the nations and the ends of the earth. The words, “whom I love, or the beloved”—would have taken the hearers back to the original beloved son, Isaac, the son of promise (Genesis 22), which is a story about redemption and sacrifice. And lastly, “the one in whom my soul delights, or with whom I am well pleased,” is a reference to Isaiah 42—God’s servant in whom his soul delights: “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.”
- C. The words of the Father affirm that Jesus is Israel’s anointed King, the Servant of Yahweh, who by the Spirit will inaugurate the kingdom of God.
- D. But Jesus isn’t just the messianic king, or “the son” who makes redemption by sacrifice. Mark notes that “Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open ...” Heaven is torn open? Whenever the Bible uses this sort of language, it’s saying that God is about to speak or act, and that someone will get a glimpse into the purposes of God.

- E. Isaiah actually prayed this. He says, “Oh, that you would tear the heavens and come down.” We can read the whole passage in Isaiah 63:1–64:4. He says, “**Look down from heaven and see, from your lofty throne, holy and glorious. Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion are withheld from us. But you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us or Israel acknowledge us; you, Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. Why, Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes that are your inheritance. For a little while your people possessed your holy place, but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary. We are yours from of old; but you have not ruled over them, they have not been called by your name. Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you! As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil, come down to make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you! For when you did awesome things that we did not expect, you came down, and the mountains trembled before you. Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.**”—Isaiah 63:15–64:4
- F. The prophet Isaiah prays that the barrier between heaven and earth (the result of the fall of humanity in the garden) would be torn open and God would be among his people. Mark is saying that this is happening in Jesus. In Jesus, the fabric between heaven and earth is torn open and God is among his people. God is among us. In Jesus Christ, an irreversible cosmic change has taken place. This breaking in of heaven to earth is the great turning point in history—what all the world has been waiting for—even though they might not have known it. And what has been opened cannot be closed, what is torn is never the same again because God is on the human scene.
1. “The world according to Mark is a world torn open by God. From the moment when the heavens are torn open at Jesus’ baptism to the moment when the curtain of the Temple is torn in two at his death, this is a story of God’s powerful incursion into the created order.”—Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospel*
- G. All over these introductory verses, with the language Mark uses, he is telling us that this is exactly what God has done—he is tearing open the heavens and coming down to bring his long-awaited salvation and redemption.
- H. According to Mark, this Gospel is God’s answer to Isaiah’s cry and the cry of 1st century Israel. The tearing open of heaven and the descent of the Spirit on Jesus signifies that God’s “last days” work of deliverance is beginning. God is returning to rule over Israel once again through his anointed King Jesus ... **Aslan is on the move.**
1. The first thing that Jesus, the Spirit-anointed Messiah, God in the flesh, does, after this revealing is to go into the wilderness to face humanity’s greatest enemy—the Satan. I wish we had more time this morning to talk about this—but I will say that Mark, more than any other gospel writer, records Jesus’ interaction with the demonic world. Clearly, Jesus is here to cleanse the world of evil, to take on the great enemy of humanity and creation. He is here not to expel the Romans or Gentiles, but to take on the powers of darkness, the evil behind all evil. And as we will see, when evil and darkness comes into contact with Jesus, it trembles at his word and his presence.

#### IV. **Believing in the kingdom of God—Join God’s kingdom campaign**

- A. “Later on, after John was arrested, Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God’s Good News. ‘The time has come’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near! Repent and believe the Good News!’”
- B. **God’s good news.** This term “good news” would have had its own significance in Jesus’ day because Caesar Augustus’ coming to power was proclaimed as “Good News” or Gospel—Caesar claimed to be the son of God, who brought peace to the whole world through his reign and the Pax Romana.

Mark, then, is subverting and challenging that claim, saying that actually—the True Son of God has come, in the person of Jesus Christ, and has established the true kingdom of peace. But this term “Good News” would also have had an older, deeper, and richer meaning for the Jews of Jesus’ time.

- C. Once again, Isaiah the prophet, in chapter 52, paints this vision of the people of Zion, of Jerusalem watching, waiting for a messenger who will bring the “Good News”—that their exile in Babylon is over, that judgment is complete. He writes, “**How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.**”—Isaiah 52:7–10
- D. The kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven is a huge biblical idea woven throughout Scripture. To proclaim that the kingdom of God was here was a was hugely-packed statement! For the Jew, the kingdom of God referred to God’s final and eternal reign over his creation—God would finally return as the world’s rightful King! The kingdom of God meant a guaranteed new heavens and new earth, a healed material creation; absolute wholeness and well-being—physically, spiritually, socially, and economically.
- E. The kingdom was bound up with the Old Testament concept of shalom—The peace and glory of God permeating every part of the creation. The kingdom was said to be fully established when all that is broken and wrong with this world is mended and made right. As such, it is tightly bound up with poverty, oppression, misery, and sin, in all its various forms, being brought to an end, and an ushering in of absolute flourishing, prosperity, and blessing of the creation.
- F. Jesus is claiming that THAT kingdom was here. In Jesus, God’s kingdom is on the move to bring about the restoration and redemption that God had always promised.

V. **So what does it mean, then, when Jesus says repent and believe the Gospel?**

- A. “When Jesus says, ‘Repent and believe in the good news’ towards the beginning of his ministry in Mark chapter 1, there’s almost an exact parallel to that in the Jewish writer, Josephus. He talks about a time when he went to Galilee in the 60s of the first century and he said to one of the brigand leaders, ‘Repent and believe in me!’ What Josephus was saying was, ‘Give up your way of doing stuff ... I’ve got a better idea ... Come with me!’ That’s what those words sounded like in Galilee in the first century! When Jesus told people to repent, he didn’t mean ‘Have some kind of sad religious experience.’ He meant ‘You’re going the wrong way! You’re going to have to turn around because God is doing a new thing. If you’re going to be part of that new thing, you’re going to have to give up the way you’ve been going.’”—N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone*
- B. Sadly in our Western culture, we have relegated this call of Jesus to repent and believe to feeling sorry about our lives and giving mental assent that he is God and we need forgiveness. The Bible sometimes uses the word “believe” in terms of mental assent—but more often, and especially in the context of salvation, what God is calling for is our **allegiance!** He is calling us to be radically faithful to his King, to his kingdom, and his kingdom work.
  - 1. “True ‘faith’ (or belief) is not an irrational launching into the void but a reasonable, action-oriented response grounded in the conviction that God’s invisible underlying realities are more certain than any apparent realities ... With regard (then) to eternal salvation, rather than speaking of belief, trust, or faith in Jesus, we should speak instead of fidelity to Jesus as cosmic Lord or allegiance to Jesus the king.”—Matthew W. Bates, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*

## VI. A different kind of kingdom

- A. Mark's Gospel is intentionally in direct contrast and contradiction to the various religious/political camps of Jesus' day and the way they saw the kingdom coming, how the Good News comes into this world.
1. Church, there were many political parties in Jesus' day—but Jesus does not cozy up with any of them. He's on a different mission, and he has a different politic. So also today! He is here for the redemption and restoration of humanity. He's here to destroy and to plunder the kingdom of darkness. His mission concerns the establishing of the kingdom of God and the redemption of the whole human race, not just the people of Israel.
    - a. As Mark's Gospel continues, Jesus' kingdom agenda is made more and more clear for us.
  2. **For the Sadducees—and those who are well off in this world, satisfied with their own comfort and ease**
    - a. In Mark 10, specifically Jesus redefines power and greatness in his kingdom. Rather than power being used for one's own benefit, comfort, gain, or platform—power, or greatness is used for the sake of others. Power is used for the weak, for the poor, for the nameless and outcast—to bring justice and righteousness.
    - b. We tend to think of leaders or those in the place of power and greatness as the ones who are served. This is the way it works in all human cultures. It is the one at the top who is supported by everyone else, waiting on them to do their will. Jesus' kingdom diagram is like an upside-down triangle—the one who leads, or is on the “top,” is actually the one who is servant of all! It's completely backwards and upside down.
    - c. Jesus puts that capstone on this by speaking of Jewish theology's ultimate ruler—The Son of Man—the long-awaited King, the One to whom YAHWEH will grant the kingdom, the power, and the glory, the One who will rule the nations with a rod of iron, etc. This great One will exhibit his greatness not by being served, but by serving and giving his life as a ransom (a sacrifice) for many.
      - i. As the Sadducees sought to keep their power through temple control and the sacrificial system, Jesus would show his power by one great substitution and sacrifice of himself for his people.
  3. **For the Zealots—and those who want to advance the kingdom by force**
    - a. Jesus is a different kind of Messiah (King), one who is here to defeat Israel's great enemies. But it's not the Romans, as they suppose—It is instead the power behind the brutal power of Rome and every other brutal empire before or since—the kingdom of Satan and of darkness. But how this will come about is absolutely incredible—instead of Jesus speaking of the violent death of his enemies, he is speaking of his own violent death by his enemies. Jesus speaks of this three times, almost back to back in Mark's Gospel, and in the middle of these, Jesus gives his most challenging invitation to his disciples: **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”**—Mark 8:34–36
    - b. Jesus isn't only telling us that this is how his kingdom will come about—but this is the only way that we participate in the kingdom of God, by following Jesus in his own self-sacrificial way of life. This is the way of God's kingdom that Jesus is bringing into being ...

- i. “(The) law of Christ forbids activity in the name of God that does not correspond to the divine graciousness displayed in the faithful and loving death of Jesus, and it requires an ongoing individual and communal discernment of how to actualize the love of God in creative but faithful ways. Those in Christ must ‘keep in step with the Spirit’ (Gal 5:25), learning how the Spirit continues to empower the faithful in a life that corresponds to the reconciling, redeeming love of God in Christ, the love that is both giving and forgiving. Reconciled and redeemed, the community re-incarnates that kenotic (laying aside), cruciform love of God, not only within itself, but also in the world, as a foretaste of the final salvation to come.”—Michael Gorman, *Reading Paul*
4. **For the Pharisees and Essenes—those who tend toward self-righteousness, personal reform, and removal from the world**
- a. As you move through the Gospel of Mark, it is startling to see who Jesus associates with.
  - b. He invites those who have no formal training and no cultural power or influence to be his personal disciples—Galileans and many women at that. He touches the unclean—with all kinds of various disease—those considered cursed by God for their own sin or the sins of their families. He eats and drinks with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners—these are the ones that the Pharisees would consider under God’s judgment and curse. Yet these are the very people Jesus is saying that his kingdom is for!! These are the ones he is inviting to be his disciples and to continue his kingdom mission.
  - i. “The coming of the kingdom, as Jesus announced it, put before his contemporaries a challenge, an agenda: give up your interpretation of your tradition, your view of the kingdom which is driving you towards ruin. Embrace instead a very different interpretation of the tradition, one which, though it looks like the way of loss, is in fact the way to true victory, the way of the cross.”—N. T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament in Its World*

## Conclusion

By looking at Jesus’ own display of the kingdom, how should we understand how the kingdom of God comes today? How is the kingdom of God put on display by the people of God? How are we challenged to turn from what we are hoping in, looking for redemption and renewal other than simply following Jesus in his kingdom way?

Jesus’ kingdom doesn’t come through compromise and collaboration with the powers of this world, whether political or through private enterprise. It comes through God’s people sacrificing and using power for the sake and benefit of others—taking up our cross and following the King.

It doesn’t come through our own exclusivity and personal holiness that serves our personal benefit. It comes through a sheer display of God’s grace and goodness—to which we respond in lives of justice, righteousness, and mercy.

It does not come through violence and coercion—but through sacrificial love, forgiving our enemies, and making peace.

It does not come through us removing ourselves from the real world with its evil, its pain, its suffering—it comes from the Church living out its witness before the watching world—taking the Good News everywhere, but especially to the downtrodden, the poor, the outsider, the sinner.

In Mark’s Gospel, the great invitation is to be Jesus’ disciples (giving him our complete allegiance)—his close followers who will learn his way of being, catch his kingdom vision, and take it to the ends of the Earth. Whole

life (living out the way of Jesus into every sphere—what would Jesus do if he lived my life and had my opportunities?), word and deed, justice and mercy, confronting spiritual darkness and evil.

Jesus' message to us and to all people is—*Turn from whatever you are hoping in, what you think will satisfy you, what will give you the power you really want and need, and set all your hope on me. Give me your whole person—all your attention and all your dreams—come follow me!*

What would happen if the people of God gave themselves in this way to the Good News of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God? What might it look like for you and I to live out the kingdom that Jesus said was here—to bring that upside-down kingdom to the places God has called us to?

## **Communion**

As we come to the table this morning, let us ask the Spirit to guide each of us individually, our community collectively into the way of Jesus—to heal what is broken by sin and selfishness, to break and heal whatever is fueled by pride or fear, and that everything we do might be an act of faithfulness to our King.

We know that because of human sinfulness and brokenness, there is not one of us that has lived up to the ideal of what God created us for—to love him supremely and to love our neighbor as ourselves. So as we come to the table this morning, we come as a people in need of forgiveness and in need of redemption and salvation. And that is what Jesus offer us at this table—forgiveness, redemption, and salvation. His life for our life; his righteousness for our sin and brokenness.

## **Prayer—**

Most merciful God,

We confess that we have sinned against you

In thought, word, and deed,

By what we have done,

And by what we have left undone.

We have not loved you with our whole heart;

We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent.

For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,

Have mercy on us and forgive us

That we may delight in your will

And walk in your ways,

To the glory of your Name. Amen.