

September 18, 2016

## Suffering Servant, Sovereign Lord *The Beginning of the Gospel*

Mark 1:1 – 8

This morning we begin a new sermon series in the gospel of Mark that will take us all the way through Resurrection Sunday, with just a few stops along the way for various stand-alone sermons. Mark is generally accepted as the earliest gospel among the four we have today, and may have been even the first attempt at to capture the gospel in written form. The author, although no name is given in the account, is believed to have been John Mark, the apostle Peter's disciple he refers to in his first letter as his son. John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and the son of Mary whose home was a meeting place for the early church in Acts 12. He may also be the young man described in this gospel in chapter 14, running naked from the garden when the soldiers and religious Jews arrested Jesus. We know that he accompanied Saul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey but deserted them partway through. And it was this Mark that Paul refused to take with him on his second mission, but was evidently restored to fellowship as Paul later refers to him as his co-worker in his letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, and tells Timothy to be sure and bring Mark with him when he came to Rome to be with Paul.

Mark was well-known in that early Christian community and he appears to have written this from the city of Rome and to the church community there in Rome. It is evident from the content of this gospel that his anticipated audience was not the Jewish Christians, but the Gentile Christians in Rome. Mark uses a lot of Latin words in his gospel, and provides explanations for certain Aramaic words and expressions that would have not needed translation for a primarily Jewish audience. He also uses units of Roman time instead of Jewish units of time. And most importantly, he doesn't include any kind of genealogy, which for Jewish audiences was very important. Even the gospel of John, which doesn't have an extensive human genealogy begins with an eternal genealogy: '*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...and the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us...*'. Scholars generally agree that this gospel was first written to encourage and strengthen the faith of these believers in Rome who were beginning to feel the heavy hand of Nero's persecution of their faith.

In this gospel, Mark is going to primarily do two things. Throughout roughly the first half of the gospel he presents Jesus as the Sovereign Lord. He is sovereign over all sickness and death. He is sovereign over the natural world and over the demonic world. His kingdom transcends all earthly kingdoms. He is the one who is coming with great power and authority to close the books on evil and suffering and bring in the kingdom of God. The second half of Mark is given over to show how this Sovereign Lord is also the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. You see, the Jews, and the early Christians all looked forward with anticipation to the coming of the King. They were looking for a triumphant Messiah. They expected someone who would come to wipe out the hated Romans and bring in the restored kingdom of David. They expected a Sovereign Lord. They looked for a victorious King. What they got instead was a Suffering Servant.

They hadn't read their Old Testament carefully enough. To this day, Jewish bible scholars do not know what to make of the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah 53. He just doesn't fit their concept of a conquering King. Beginning with Peter's confession of the deity of Christ in chapter 8, Mark spends the last half of his gospel highlighting the necessity that this Sovereign Lord endure suffering at the hands of those He came to save. From this point on Jesus begins to tell His disciples plainly that He must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. Over and over Jesus tells them that this Sovereign Lord must suffer and die. It is an upside-down, topsy-turvy reality of the kingdom of God that underscores Jesus' ministry. The first shall be last and the last shall be first. Losing in order to win. Dying in order to really live. And He outlines His mission in chapter 10 by saying, '*For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many*'.<sup>1</sup>

And so we are presented with this portrait of Jesus in the gospel of Mark as the Sovereign Lord and as the Suffering Servant. And so Mark begins: *1 The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*. Now we are so very familiar with this word **gospel** that we might run right by it without thinking. But I don't want you to do that because Mark is saying something here that his 1<sup>st</sup> century audience would understand quite differently than audiences in our day. When a 1<sup>st</sup> century person, especially a Roman, heard the word **gospel**, it was not an unfamiliar word. It was a very old word and had a well-known use. Its basic meaning is of course good news, glad tidings, joyous message. But the context of its use was very different than what we understand. In the Roman world it was used in reference to the arrival or birth of a king, a ruler, in this case, a Caesar.

For example, here is the inscription dedicated to Augustus Caesar on the occasion of his birthday: *The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere . . . the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the **gospel** that has come to men through him.*<sup>2</sup> In other words, Augustus Caesar's birth was the good news, the glad tidings, that a king has come, a ruler has arrived. This was the gospel.

You see, this would have grabbed that ancient audience from the start because Mark is not writing about Caesar; he's not announcing the good news that another Caesar has come. He's promoting the gospel of someone named Jesus. He is about to write the history of new king; someone whose story transcends the story of any earthly king or caesar. In this gospel, Caesar and Christ confront each other. The emperor on the throne opposed to the rabbi on the cross. And Mark is making a statement to his Roman audience that this gospel presents the ultimate King who sets Himself against all other kings and rulers and potentates as the King of kings, the Sovereign of sovereigns. Jesus Christ, the Son of God has entered into history and inaugurated His kingdom, bringing real salvation, real blessing, real peace and real order to the world.

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1 Mark 10:45 ESV

2 N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1997), 43.

And not only that, this Jesus, this Messiah, the anointed one, is the very Son of God, a title claimed by Augustus. From the beginning, Mark is telling the story of a new king, a new Sovereign that has come on the scene. A divine Sovereign to whom everyone owes allegiance. You see His name is Jesus, which means Yahweh is salvation. Remember the angel who spoke to Mary, *'Call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins'*.<sup>3</sup> His name is Jesus, and His title is Christ, Messiah, anointed One. It's a royal title. And this royal human is also divine – the Son of God. As a man He is Jesus; as Sovereign Lord He is Messiah; and in His lineage, He is God. In the gospel of John, Nathaniel sees Him for who He is and confesses: *'You are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel'*.<sup>4</sup> He is a new kind of King with a radically new kind of kingdom; who sets Himself above every other king and kingdom of the world. And by His words and by His works; by His death and resurrection, He demonstrates the full reality of Mark's claims that with this one, the real gospel has come.

So when the Bible talks about the gospel, the first implication is that we are talking about the arrival of this King. But there's a lot more to it and I just want to take a little time this morning to flesh out what we mean when we are talking about the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. There are lots of so-called 'gospel' messages out there today but most of them are proclaiming something other than the real thing. Some messages tell you that if you come to Jesus He'll make your life better, you'll have His favor, you'll walk in prosperity and health. That's not the gospel. The gospel also is not behavior modification, becoming a better person or learning to become more moral. It is not taking the life of Jesus as a model way to live or working to transform or redeem this world. The gospel is not telling people to love their neighbor or feeding the hungry, clothing the poor and healing the sick. These are all good things but they are not to be confused with the gospel. They should accompany the gospel, and should not be separated from the gospel and while God may use them to authenticate the gospel and make our proclamation of the gospel more fertile in hardened hearts yet they are not to be viewed as replacements for the gospel.

Did you notice the one characteristic of all of the above definitions has nothing to do with what Christ has done for us, but all about what we do for Him? ***The true gospel is news about what Christ the Savior, has already done for us (in His life, death and resurrection) rather than instruction and advice about what you are to do for God.*** Christ's accomplishment, not ours, is the essence of the gospel. Above all, the gospel of Christ brings good news, rather than instruction about our behavior. The gospel is not about doing good; but doing good is always a glad and thankful response to what Christ has done for us. In other religions, God reveals to us how we can find or achieve salvation. Buddhism has the Eight-Fold Path to Nirvana; Islam has the Five Pillars to follow if you even hope to be saved; Judaism has the Law of God you must obey in order to be saved. All other religions focus on what you must do. Christianity focuses on what God has done for you in Christ. In all the other religions – you achieve salvation. In Christianity, God achieves salvation for us. The gospel we proclaim is an historic event; that is, it is the proclamation that Jesus the King, came into the world and died and rose again for us. That is what we proclaim.

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3 Matthew 1:21 ESV

4 John 1:29 ESV

If the historic events of His life did not happen, then Christianity does not "work", because the ***good news is what God has done in history to save us***, rather than advice about what we must do to reach God. The gospel is news that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in history has achieved our salvation. Jesus does not just bring good news; He is the good news.

The Gospel is called the 'good news' because it addresses the most serious problem that you and I have as human beings, and that problem is this: God is holy and He is just, and I'm not. And at the end of my life, I'm going to stand before a just and holy God, and I'll be judged. And I'll be judged either on the basis of my own righteousness – or lack of it – ***or the righteousness of another***. The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus lived a life of perfect righteousness, of perfect obedience to God, not for His own well being but for His people. He has done for me what I couldn't possibly do for myself. But not only has He lived that life of perfect obedience, He offered Himself as a perfect sacrifice to satisfy the justice and the righteousness of God. In other words, He lived the life I should have lived and He died the death I should have died. And when we believe in the finished work of Christ, His death is applied to us and we are covered with His robe of righteousness and we are reconciled to God.

This is what it means to embrace the gospel. This is what it means to believe in Jesus. And this is the story that Mark is telling. And to reinforce the theme of this new King, he introduces Him through the prophetic messenger: ***2 As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way,*** Mark knows that if Gentiles are going to look at the story of this new king as the authentic arrival of a legitimate contender, then they would expect to hear a credible messenger deliver the news. That's how it worked in the ancient world. The king would have a forerunner – someone who went ahead of the king announcing his coming. A legitimate king never announced himself. He had someone who went before him to do it. And so Mark reaches back, not to prophecies about Jesus, but to prophecies about His forerunner. He takes two prophecies, this one from Malachi in verse two, and the one in verse three, from Isaiah, to do it. ***3 the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,'"***.

Just so you're not thrown off by the fact that Mark only references Isaiah when one of the quotations comes from another prophet, you need to understand that this is a common New Testament device. For one thing, the fact that these prophecies go together so perfectly and they both refer to the same person, and the way Mark uses them here, means they were probably frequently used together. Sometimes New Testament writers quote directly from the Hebrew bible, sometimes they quote from the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible called the Septuagint, sometimes they make a general reference to a text, sometimes it is an interpretive reference. Here we have an interpretive quotation as Mark is going to apply the prophecy of Isaiah and Malachi to a specific individual named John. So Malachi 3:1 says, ***'Behold I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before Me'*** and Isaiah 40: 3 says, ***'The voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make His paths straight.'***

And Mark takes these and applies them to Jesus the coming King and to His messenger, John. *4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* In other words, the fulfillment of these passages was the appearance of John the Baptist. That isn't his last name and he didn't found a denomination. In the Greek it is John the baptizer, small b. He got that name because everyone who got close to him went under the water. That's was his ministry. He baptized people. If you went out to hear John, you got wet. And you have to understand that this was an unusual ministry for the Jews. Unlike most evangelical churches, Jewish synagogues do not have baptistries. At least they didn't back then. Religious Jews do not baptize. They have ceremonial cleansings and ceremonial washings, but they don't take people and put them under water. Unless they are converting. If someone wanted to convert to Judaism, they would baptize them one time to symbolize their purification from a defiled Gentile religion to the clean faith of Judaism.

But John is out in the wilderness down by the Jordan River baptizing Jews. *5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And the Scripture tells us that what he was doing was making ready the way of the Lord. In ancient times, the envoy of an arriving king would go before the king, remove all the obstacles in the road, so that the king could pass unhindered. Sometimes they would actually build a road, making bridges, smoothing the ground and so forth. And they would make sure the people were ready to receive their king. Interestingly enough, right now in Kenya there is a man who is laying claim to the ministry of the end time prophet and calling for repentance and holiness in preparation for the return of Jesus. I don't know if he does this everywhere, but before he came to Eldoret in 2014, thousands of his disciples literally washed the main highway that runs through the city in preparation for his coming. That is the imagery. Prepare the way of the Lord – make His path straight.

So how were these people preparing to receive this King? They were trekking out into the wilderness and being baptized by John in the Jordan, confessing their sins. They needed to have their sins forgiven and in order for that to happen, they needed to repent. To demonstrate their repentance, they needed to be willing to be baptized. But this baptism didn't bring forgiveness of sin, it only declared their intention. And because only Gentile proselytes were ever baptized in the Jewish tradition, what a Jew was saying by this baptism of repentance was *'I'm no better than a Gentile. I'm no more ready to meet the King than an unwashed Gentile.'* That was a radical confession for a Jew who wouldn't even darken the door of a Gentile's house. By going out to John in the wilderness, those who believed John's message of a coming King, showed they wanted to be visibly separated from those under judgment when the King showed up. They wanted to be identified with the purified Israel and being baptized with this baptism of repentance, confessing their sins, was a means of assuring them that they would be included in the future Israel whose iniquity would be removed as Isaiah goes on to say in his prophecy.

They are called to the wilderness, and William Lane puts it so well in his commentary: *'The summons to be baptized in the Jordan meant that Israel must come once more to the wilderness. As Israel long ago had been separated from Egypt by a pilgrimage through the waters of the Red Sea, the nation is exhorted again to experience separation; the people are called to a second exodus in preparation for a new covenant with God.'*<sup>5</sup> As the people flock to the wilderness, far more is involved than repentance and confession. They return to the place of judgment, the wilderness, where the status of Israel as God's beloved son must be reestablished in the exchange of pride for humility. The willingness to return to the wilderness acknowledges Israel's history of disobedience and rebellion against God and a desire to begin again. They are humbling themselves in response to Isaiah's word: *'But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and who trembles at My word'*.<sup>6</sup>

Nathan Cole, a Connecticut farmer in the eighteenth century, became a Christian as he listened to a sermon by George Whitefield, who was famous for his outdoor preaching, in Connecticut in 1740. Cole later gave an account of his experience and said: *"And my hearing him preach, gave me a heart wound; By Gods blessings: my old Foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me."* This is what the wilderness does. It brings you to the place where humility and contrition work to prepare your heart for the King.

Mark also emphasizes this identification with the wilderness experience as he describes John: *6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.* Both his clothing and his food are those that would have been familiar to any wilderness nomads and characterize life in the desert. It also served to identify John's place in the prophetic record by linking him to the prophet Elijah, whom the Bible describes as a hairy man with a leather belt. This was important because of the prophecy about John we find in Luke 1: *'...for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.'*<sup>7</sup> If you go back to Malachi 4, you'll find that he was already mentioned there: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. 6 And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers"*<sup>8</sup> And Jesus said in Matthew 11: *'If you are willing to accept it, (meaning Me and My gospel) John himself is that Elijah'*.<sup>9</sup>

Finally John completes this wilderness picture with a promise: *7 And he preached, saying, "After me comes He who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I have baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."* It is clear from the rest of Mark's gospel and from the other gospels that John was not sure who this mightier one was, but he was very clear on what He would do.

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5 William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1974), 50.

6 Isaiah 66:2b ESV

7 Luke 1:15-17 ESV

8 Malachi 4:5-6 ESV

9 Matthew 11:14 ESV

What John was doing with water, this mighty one would do with the Holy Spirit. John's baptism could only touch them on the outside; this coming one would baptize with the Holy Spirit on the inside. This was a promise that drew on more imagery and prophecy from the Old Testament. For centuries the Jews had held on to the promise that when God brought His people out once and for all, finally and ultimately, when the real exodus happened, that would be the time that God came to dwell with His people. He would be with them and they would be His people and He would be their God.

In the first Exodus story, God was among His people in a pillar of fire and a cloud. Now He would be in them, as the very air they breathe and as a fire in their hearts. Matthew and Luke both add to this imagery when they repeat John's message to the people: *'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'*<sup>10</sup> In effect John was saying, 'This baptism of repentance is necessary, but it only goes so far. It cannot save you or transform you. But there is One coming, the One whom I am announcing, that brings salvation with His baptism. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit. My baptism can only clean the outside of the cup; His baptism will clean the inside.' And what he was talking about was exactly what the New Testament teaches about this baptism of the Holy Spirit: *But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by His grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.*<sup>11</sup>

This is the gospel. This is the good news. There's a new King who is God Himself bringing a new Kingdom. It's a Kingdom of forgiveness, salvation and blessing; and it comes to those who confess their need and repent. It's the culmination of all past redemptive history and the door to all future glory. Have you been baptized with this baptism? It's not enough to wash the outside. You need the Holy Spirit and fire to come in and renovate the inside. Salvation comes through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit.

*Heavenly Father,*

*We thank You this morning for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God that has brought good news of the King who has come and will come again. We thank You that by faith in Jesus we are in Your Kingdom. We thank You that we're not on the outside looking in, but You have led us to confession and repentance and faith in Jesus, and believing we have salvation and life in His name. We thank You for this gracious gift and pray that those who have heard Your word this morning and have not yet come to You in confession and repentance would even now respond to the gospel and experience the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit which You pour out richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, we pray in His precious name, Amen.*

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10 Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16 ESV

11 Titus 3:4-7 ESV