

It All Depends on Your Point of View

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[0 : 00] Mark chapter 1, if you would open there please, page 836, Mark chapter 1, verse 11.

A voice came from heaven, you are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased. A couple of weeks ago the newspapers carried a story that came from Spain, a little town of Zaragoza, where in the main church there's a cultural masterpiece, it's a painting, 100 year old painting of Jesus, crown of thorns, and it's falling into disrepair.

And one of the older members of the congregation, an 80 year old pensioner, was distressed with the disrepair to this painting and so she decided to take things into her own hands.

Some of you may remember this. And without any training in paints or any experience, she did the restoration herself. I think it was overnight. And it was well meant, but, and I have the pictures in front of me here, the result is both hilarious and tragic.

The original has, it's a classic painting of Jesus looking up to heaven with the crown of thorns.

Afterward, it looks like Mr Bean has got finger paint, and Jesus looks a little like what I think Sasquatch would look like.

[1 : 36] It's very funny, and you'll have to believe me, and I can point you to it later. They're not sure it can be saved. They're not sure it can be re-restored again.

As I looked at that, I thought that's a brilliant picture of what we do with Jesus. We like to do touch-ups on Jesus a little bit here, a little bit there, until we have the Jesus we like.

And the more he becomes the Jesus we like, the less he becomes like the real Jesus. And there's a reason we do this, I think. We usually create a Jesus depending on what we think is wrong.

So, if you need more money, prosperity Jesus fits the bill. If you think the world needs to be a nicer place, you'll have a sentimental Jesus, who just teaches love one another, peace, the brotherhood of all humankind.

If you think the problem with the world is poverty and the class struggle, you might go for a Marxist revolutionary Jesus. If you think Christians are dull, you go for party Jesus.

[2 : 47] I'm not going to say anything about that. If you think we Christians ought to make a big splash in our society, you might go for theme park Jesus, Disneyland Jesus.

There's so many ways to hijack Jesus for our own purposes. But the more we change the real Jesus to become what we want, the less power he has to change us and to save us.

So, today is the first Sunday of a new term, new year. And as the trees change color, there's this sense of hope, isn't there?

There's a sense of opportunity in the fall. And what we're going to do is we are going to begin and go through Mark's gospel. And I've called this series Real Jesus.

And Mark's gospel is the shortest, easiest, fastest, earliest gospel.

[3 : 44] We're taking, it's a bit of a different tack from 1 and 2 Samuel. And it's, as I said, it's fast. It's furious. It's frenetic. And it's fantastic.

And I want to encourage you somewhere this week and over the next weeks, once a week, to make it your discipline to read through Mark's gospel.

You can do it in under an hour. Read through the whole thing. And as you read through it, the first thing that strikes you, I think, is that it's messy. It's very untidy.

Mark won't be systematized, very much like real life. And sometimes you read a passage and you think, why is that there?

And I don't know, frankly. Sometimes there are no answers given to us in this gospel. And honestly, I love that. And it means as we read these stories, we move from being spectators to participants.

[4 : 44] We enter into the drama. And my prayer is that we will come to faith, full faith, in the real Jesus. All of which is to say, I hope you felt as we read, as Maria read through the reading this

morning, how strange the first 15 verses of the gospel are.

It breathes a completely different air than the rest of the gospel. Reading these verses is like entering a theater and you sit down and then the lights go down and there's nothing on stage. And a voice, you hear a voice from off stage saying something like, speaking in words that come from 700 years before announcing the coming of the Lord and one who will prepare his way. And then you see a faint light on the backdrop and we're in the wilderness. And then another voice calls the people of God from Judea and Jerusalem to repent and to be baptized and to go into the Jordan River.

And I have been to the Jordan. And if you get baptized in the Jordan, you need to see a doctor afterwards. It's not very clean. However, there we are in the wilderness and the voice calling people to repent says, that one is coming who is mightier than I, who will baptize you in the very life of God, the Holy Spirit himself.

[6 : 13] And then a spotlight comes on one character, one main character, Jesus. He appears on stage, but he doesn't do anything. There's no interest in his birth or his background.

Everything is done to him. He is baptized by John. The heaven is torn open. He sees the spirit coming down on him.

He hears the voice from heaven, again spoken from the heavens now, saying, you are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased. And then the spirit propels him, it's a violent word, out into the wilderness where he is tested by Satan.

I hope you feel the strangeness of it. Not just because it's not like the rest of the gospel. In the rest of the gospel, it's Jesus who takes initiatives, and it's action, action, action, action, immediately, immediately, suddenly.

Nor is it just strange because we meet wild beasts and angels and Satan and this strange prophet and hear the voice from heaven. I think the reason it's disorienting is because this early section, we have the massive privilege of seeing things from God's own point of view.

[7 : 24] We see Jesus from God's point of view. So in verse 2, you see, when Isaiah is quoted, it's God speaking.

I send my messenger before your face speaking to Jesus. At the baptism, who tears the heavens? It's God who tears the heavens.

Who speaks? It's God who speaks. And when Jesus finally preaches in verse 14, what does he first say? It's the gospel of God. And I think that's one of the reasons why this early section seems so restrained and spare, even while it's cosmic in scope.

There's an infinite joy and an infinite sadness in these simple words. And you and I have the stunning privilege of seeing the real Jesus through the eyes of God here.

Because these first 15 verses act as a door for us into the gospel of Mark. They are the key for understanding who Jesus is, what he's come to do, why he's come to do it.

[8 : 32] Only God knows the real Jesus. And I think without this view through the first 15 verses, we can't understand this drama. And we'll keep wanting to make Jesus to suit ourselves.

So what I would like to do is just focus on one verse. There's so much in here. And that verse is verse 11, where God speaks from heaven. They are 10 words in the original.

And one of the commentators says they are pregnant with meaning. That's an understatement. They're full of depth and mystery. And I want us today, as we look at the passage through these words of God, to enter this door, enter into the mind of God and see the real Jesus.

And what God does, is he says three things about Jesus. And each time he refers back to the Old Testament. It's very interesting, isn't it? You'll notice that whenever God speaks audibly in the New Testament, he always quotes the Old Testament as those saying, this is my word.

So I want to make three points. And during our little journey today, twice we're going to turn to the Old Testament and read a fairly lengthy section.

[9 : 51] You'll be excited, I know, to do that. So firstly, firstly God says, verse 11, you are my son.

Audible voice. You are my son. And what God means is that Jesus has come to rule and bring the great restoration. Let me explain.

Throughout this passage, there's a sense of joy, of newness, of the restoration of all things. This passage announces that time has come for God to fix what is wrong in the world, to show his rule in history in a new and perfect way, to set wrongs right, to redress injustice, to bring healing, to establish peace and plenty.

Verse 1, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's good news of Jesus Christ. Verse 3, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight. That comes from Isaiah 40. Remember Isaiah 40? Speaking of this coming of the sun, every valley will be lifted up, every mountain and hill will be made low.

[11:05] The uneven ground shall become level. The rough places are plain. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed. All flesh shall see it together.

He shall tend his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in his bosom. He will gently lead those who are with young.

If you've got young children, if you're a parent of young children, that's a verse for you. God particularly cares for you. But when God says, you are my son, he is quoting from Psalm 2. And I want you to turn. If you keep your finger in Mark and turn back to Psalm 2, if you have your Bibles open. It's in the Old Testament. Psalm 2 is God's answer to what is wrong with the world. You can see in the first two verses. In the midst of war and injustice, where the weak are trodden underfoot. What is God's answer? Verse 6. He sets up his son as king.

[12:25] And then the king, God's son speaks. Verse 7. And I'm just going to read a couple of these verses. I will tell of the decree. The Lord said to me, you are my son.

There's the quote. Today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

Now therefore, O kings, be wise, be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling. And how do we do that? Kiss the son. Lest he be angry and you perish in the way.

For his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are those who take refuge in him. Every Jew in the first century knew these words very well. They knew this promise.

That one day God would send his anointed son, the king, who would destroy all resistance and God would set him up with universal rule. When God says to Jesus that day at his baptism, you are my son, he is speaking about victory, power, glory, overcoming evil, opposition, injustice, and the restoration of beauty and equity, blessing, and love.

[13:38] And it means the Old Testament is in end. And I think that's why four times we are taken into the wilderness in this early part of Mark. Because the wilderness was the place of new beginnings, of new hope, of redemption.

It was in the wilderness where God delivered his people and made them his people and gave himself to them to be their God. That's where they found their true identity. That's where they learned to trust him and rely on him without anything else.

You know, when God speaks about that time in the Old Testament, he calls it the honeymoon period. And now that the sun has come, he's bringing a new beginning.

It's going to completely transcend and supersede that old covenant as well as fulfilling it. That's why John the Baptist is important. He's the last Old Testament prophet. He says, I can wash you on the outside, but there's one coming who's a mighty one.

And he's going to give you something no other human being can give you, the direct and active presence of God. He's going to baptize you in the spirit, which is what restoration looks like in our lives.

[14:46] It's not a moral improvement or a ritual. It's being brought out of sin and back into the presence of God. John the Baptist is saying the one who's coming is infinitely greater than Abraham and Moses and Elijah and David.

And he's coming not to rejuvenate or revive Israel, but to deal with the enemies of humanity. That's what God means when he says to Jesus, you are my son. This is God's answer for the troubles of the world.

It's the universal, sovereign, eternal rule of Jesus Christ, his son in majesty, glory and victory. In Jesus, God brings restoration.

But there's a second thing God says. If you look back at verse 11, he says, with you, I am well pleased. I haven't even thought about this. God doesn't say this because he thinks Jesus has low self-esteem.

You know, you need to tell your son twice a day that you please me. He's referring to Jesus' execution on the cross. And he quotes again, not from Psalm 2.

[15:53] This is a very, very different quote. Instead of this quote being about a sovereign ruler, this quote refers to a suffering servant, a figure who is unattractive, who doesn't look impressive, and who in the end dies.

And in the prophecy of Isaiah, there are a number of songs that speak about this servant. So I wonder if you'd just flick back to Isaiah 42, please.

Page 602. This is the first servant reference in Isaiah.

Look at verse 1. God says, Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights, in whom my soul is well pleased. It's the same word. So when the Father says from heaven, you are my son, rule and glory, with you I'm well pleased, suffering and death.

And I want to show you something that I think is just remarkable. If we turn to the last servant song, we turn right in Isaiah to chapter 53. And I'd like you to turn there if you could, please.

[17:15] Page 613. And I think you should read this. I've been doing all the work. Would you read, please, Isaiah 53 from verses 3 to 12, 3 to the end.

It's a long reading. But I want you to see, this is the servant. Okay? You with me? You understand why I'm doing this? These were God's words about the servant.

And this is the last song. So if you'd read from verse 3 to the end of 53. Let's read it together. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.

Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace.

[18:21] And with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray. We have turned every one to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted. Yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter. And like a sheep that for its shearers is silent, he opened not his mouth.

By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death. Although he had done no violence and there was no deceit in his mouth, yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He had put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days. The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.

[19:27] Out of the anguish of his soul, he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous.

And he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion of the many. And he shall divide the spoiled with the strong. Because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered among the transgressors.

Yet he bore the sin of many and made intercession for the transgressors. Thank you. And when you get home today and they say, what did you do in church today?

You say, the lazy preacher made us read the Old Testament. It's amazing, isn't it? With you I am well pleased. God is identifying Jesus as the suffering servant.

So let me try and bring these two things together. We're going to go and do a third very briefly. We go back to Mark. Jesus is the ruler who's going to bring restoration.

[20:30] He is the servant who's going to die. The way in which he's going to bring restoration is through his death. And you might think when Jesus comes, when Jesus came first, people would be overjoyed with the restoration that he's going to bring.

Nothing's further from the truth. You'd think people might bow and say, finally, the Lord will reverse injustice. But almost from the very start, there is hostility. Despite the fact that Jesus heals the sick and raises people and loves people, by the beginning of chapter 3, they're plotting how to kill him.

As we follow the disciples through the gospel, they never get it in the gospel. It's great. But here, it is as Jesus is being baptized, he hears these words, with you I am well pleased.

At the very moment that Jesus is identifying with our sin, the Father says, this is your role, this is your identity. In other words, the fundamental human problem is very simply sin.

It's not ignorance. It's not a lack of education. It's not imperfection or having bad parents. It's not just a few bad apples like Milozovic or Stalin.

[21 : 51] It's not just those terrible things that happen over there. It's sin in me. Something that the entire Old Covenant, Old Testament, could not take away. And immediately after he's baptized, the Holy Spirit drives Jesus out into the wilderness where he's tempted by Satan because sin is not just horizontal.

It's not just how we treat each other. It has a cosmic dimension. It is about how we treat God. And this gospel speaks very openly about evil and demons and Satan.

And if you're troubled by this talk, I invite you to come back next week where we're going to deal more with it. But here at the beginning of Mark, we have a door into the gospel and we need to read the whole gospel on the backdrop of this cosmic conflict.

So when Jesus heals a paralyzed man and when he forgives his sins, what he's doing is he's freeing him from the grip of Satan. He's liberating him.

And when Peter says to Jesus, don't go to the cross, it's Satan who's speaking through him. And Jesus says, when you hear the word of God taught and it doesn't go into your heart, it's Satan himself who takes it away.

[23 : 00] In Jesus, the power of God confronts and conquers the transcendent power of evil. But as I said, the restoration of blessing and the presence of God will come through his death.

You can see this from the shape of the gospel. You know, over 50% of the gospel is given to the death of Jesus. It's not a biography in the usual sense.

As Jesus teaches about his death, it's crucial, it's vital to his purposes. He sees there he is dealing with death and Satan and sin to deliver us. Jesus has come to serve us by dying.

In other words, the real Jesus didn't come to bring about a political revolution. He didn't come with a program for social justice. He isn't a world leader just calling for world peace. He brings us the life of God through his death, forgiveness, though we were guilty.

And he brings us release. And all those other things follow. But this is the central tension through the gospel of Mark. Jesus' power and authority, Jesus' suffering and sacrifice.

[24 : 10] His royal freedom to heal the sick and to raise the dead, he comes to suffer and die. And what I want to say as we finish these first few points is we've got to hold these two things together. Otherwise, we'll miss the real Jesus.

And that's why God says both. Because it's in his cross, in his suffering of death, that we see the Son of God most powerfully. Thirdly, and more briefly, there is another thing that God says.

And I've skipped over it. You look back at verse 11. I left out the word beloved. God says, you are my, in the original, you are my Son, my Beloved.

With you I'm well pleased. And if the first thing means is Jesus' rule and restoration, and the second thing, with you I'm well pleased, speaks about what it's going to cost Jesus.

Calling Jesus, my Son whom I love, God is speaking about what it's going to cost Him. I want to say this very reverently, but this is deeply personal for God and deeply agonizing.

[25 : 20] I can't find a better word. God is indicating the price that He Himself is willing to pay for our rescue. And again, these words come from the Old Testament.

We're not going to turn to it from Genesis 22. where God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, a son Isaac. And though Abraham was willing to go through it, God stops him and stays his hand and God provides the sacrifice.

At the beginning of that story, God tested Abraham, we read, and He said, Abraham, here I am, He said, take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love. And the point is, many years later, God the Father, the Great Father, the Heavenly Father, gives His own son, His only son, His beloved son, over to death.

He doesn't hold back. So the cross of Jesus Christ is the real thing. It's the ultimate sacrifice. And as Jesus pays the price of our sins on the cross, it's God Himself who pays the price of our sins as well.

God is the real thing. God is the real thing. This is one of the deepest mysteries, I think, of the Christian faith. That somehow, as Jesus dies, God is in Christ, bearing His own wrath in Himself for us.

[26 : 40] So when Jesus says, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? It's not an empty cry. It's the sound of God's heart tearing, as it were. And that is the source of our restoration, and that is the source of transformation.

It's the fact that God will pay the price for our evil, not because we deserve it, but because of His love. How much do you know, how do you know how much someone loves you? The answer is what they're willing to give for you, what they're willing to pay for you. And here at the start of Jesus' ministry, God the Father opens up His heart and He says, I will not spare my only Son.

I am giving Him up for you. He is my beloved. And because He is the beloved, it is in the cross of Jesus Christ where we find the love that cannot let us go.

A grace that will cover all our sin. A rescue from all the power of death. A life that can never be taken away. You think about it.

[27 : 49] How can God communicate to us how much this costs Him? When Jesus comes up out of the water of the baptism, we read, God tears the heavens apart.

It's a violent word. It's a rending. And at the end of the gospel, when Jesus dies on the cross and He's finished His mission, exactly the same word comes as God tears the curtain of the temple in two.

Yes, it's very good news for us. But for God, it means hideous pain. It brings us forgiveness and freedom in the life of God.

But for Him, it's the gift of His only beloved Son. And this is the door through which we enter this gospel. This is God's view of what's going on. You are my Son, the great and glorious one who will rule and bring restoration.

With you, I'm well pleased. It's going to cost you your life, my Son. My Son, my beloved. And every step you take toward the cross cuts me deeper. And we will somehow be torn by your death.

[28 : 54] It is the only way possible that people under the shadow of death can be rescued. And how are we meant to respond this morning and throughout all the gospel?

Well, verses 14 and 15, very simply. After John was arrested, which is a reminder that this Jesus will be killed.

Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

It's very interesting when you watch Jesus preaching. There's no manipulation. There's no rhetoric. He simply preaches the good news from heaven. The rule of God is now at hand. All the enemies of humanity will be overthrown.

And then he gives two simple commands. Repent and believe. And to repent means to turn away and to reject and to forsake your sin and to give up our self-made image of Jesus.

[29 : 53] And ask God to forgive you for making Jesus in your own image and believe and believe in the real Jesus, the Jesus of this gospel. Repenting by itself doesn't do anything apart from taking hold of the real Jesus.

And this is one of the most human things we can do, isn't it? To step outside ourselves, to look at ourselves and see things differently. We're able to do this and to reflect on what we should do.

And here at the end of this section, Jesus commands us to do this, to step outside our usual views and our prejudice and our usual way of living and to see him as God the Father does and to repent and believe in the gospel and so enter the kingdom of God.

Amen.