

Mark 1:14

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 05 February 2012

Preacher: Rev R Maclean

- [0 : 0 0] Please turn with me now to the Gospel of Horny... Now, after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Gospel.
- Have you ever, or do you ever feel that you're far away from God? Or that He's far away from you?
- Does this bother you? Do you wonder if this is really how it is, or if you're missing something?
- Okay. I'm pretty sure that if you sometimes feel this, that you're not alone. But the fact that you're not alone isn't enough to make you feel that this situation is okay.
- After all, you can still feel alone in a crowd. And being at a distance from one you love, or one who loves you, or that you want to love you, isn't exactly an easy thing.
- [1 : 5 7] So, what can help us in that situation? What can make our situation clearer for us?
- Maybe these words in Mark, and the words that we read earlier in the Gospel according to Matthew, can bring some clarity or some hope.
- Many, many people have struggled with the question, where is God in all of this? And I'm not talking about the cynic or the skeptic who doesn't believe in God, but the believer who's struggling with a certain situation.
- Whether it's their own circumstances, or the circumstances of somebody else close to them. A tragic death. Persecution.
- Rejection. Terminal illness. Why does God sin so far away from me right now? Is He far away from me?
- [3 : 1 7] In verse 14 of the chapter that we've just read, or rather the section of the chapter that we've just read, in Mark chapter 1, in that verse, you see that John the Baptist had been thrown into prison.
- John was a genuinely faithful man of God. He faithfully and fearlessly preached the Word of God.
- And he prepared the way for Jesus. He pointed the whole nation to Jesus. But this genuinely faithful and fearless witness for God gets sent to prison.
- Why did God allow such a thing to happen? Did John deserve this? And John isn't alone, even in the Bible. What about Joseph?
- Betrayed by his own resentful brothers. Callously sold into slavery. Angrily thrown into prison for a crime that he didn't commit.
- [4 : 3 4] And he languished there with no hope of release for years on end. Forgotten even by the friends whom he'd helped whilst he was in prison.
- Or what about Job? Who lost the family he cared for so deeply. Lost the health which he treasured, but yet didn't take for granted.

And was a virtual prisoner in his own putrefying, disease-ridden body. Suffering almost unimaginable discomfort from the sores all over his body.

Not to mention the mental anguish, which was only made worse by the platitudes, prejudice, and misguided theologizing of his supposed friends.

The list goes on. Of those in the Bible who suffered in similar or in other ways. And this kind of thing isn't confined to the Bible.

[5 : 44] What about John Bunyan? John Bunyan, a Baptist preacher in England in the 1600s, who was married and widowed and remarried and had six children, one of whom, Mary, the eldest, was blind, in a day without health care or benefits.

And he was repeatedly thrown into prison just for preaching the gospel. And locked away for months and sometimes years at a time.

Or right up to the present day. A young North Korean mother who secretly became a Christian whilst the rest of her family didn't.

But she was found out. And she was sent to a labor camp together with her parents, her husband, and her children.

All of whom she saw die and had to bury in that labor camp. The reality is, for most of these people, that though they kept the faith, they went through times when they felt as though God was far away.

[7 : 05] God may seem far away at times, even for the believer who has remained faithful. Does God seem far away in your life?

Do you struggle with feelings of being cut from your mooring, as though your whole life is adrift, and at the mercy of the waves that seem to be rising all around you?

God's love for you. Amen. Amen. Our earlier reading in Matthew chapter 10, in verse 6 of that chapter, we see another perspective.

There, Jesus describes those to whom the gospel is being sent as the lost sheep of Israel, just like the lost lone sheep in the well-known parable of the hundred sheep.

It was disorientated, knowing no direction home, needing healing for all its wounds, and a compassionate shoulder to be carried home on, because it had grown so weak.

[8 : 22] What these words show us is that we can sometimes feel far away from God. We ourselves can feel as though we are the ones at a distance.

This feeling is different from what we've described, first of all, where God seems far away. I suppose, in practical terms, it still is just as painful, regardless which way it might be, if we are aware of it.

This feeling is that God seems far away from us because we've put distance between ourselves and Him.

Maybe because of a particular sin, or just more general unbelief. Or maybe we've wandered away from the things of God.

Or maybe have never been interested in them. King David is still second king.

[9 : 35] We read about him in 2 Samuel chapters 11 and 12, or we read about him in more chapters than that, but a particular situation we read about there where he had committed sin.

He'd sinned against the Lord. He'd sinned against others. He'd committed adultery and murder. He'd committed serious sins, the result of which was that he felt at a distance from God.

And he'd grow numb through the hardening of rebellion against the command of God. But how about the Samaritan woman at the well?

She knew about religion, but this religious knowledge didn't steer her life. She had gotten into all kinds of difficulties, emotionally, relationally, and above all, spiritually.

She didn't think God was interested in her, so she shied away from such things. Or what about the Christian leader who's been caught by the authorities in his country where it's illegal to be a Christian?

[10 : 52] They tortured him for days on end, physically and mentally. And then they said before him a stark choice, deny you're a Christian and you'll live.

Refuse and we'll kill you. After a few more days of torture, he's given this terrible choice again. He's aching to see his young wife and baby son.

And under the cloud of his tortured mind, he capitulates and agrees to sign the paper denying his faith.

He rationalizes this in his fevered mind that it's only a piece of paper and that it really means nothing. He really has no intention of ceasing worshipping his Lord Jesus.

But when he gets home, although his wife is glad to see him, she's devastated by his denial. Even though it's only on paper, as it were.

[12 : 02] And as the confusion of his tortured mind begins to lift, he sees that this choice he's made was far from good. especially as he sees and begins to see the effect that it has on other believers around him.

Worst of all, in his overwhelming sense of shame-ridden guilt, he feels as though he's drifted a million miles from God. As though he's put up a barrier between himself and the Lord and indeed all whom he loves.

But what about the person who has been brought up, being told the truth, has been taught the gospel of Jesus Christ, but they take a different path and they follow what they think is a more exciting way.

But after the thrill has died down and life becomes a drudgery, they long for something more meaningful in their lives.

They long for some sense of direction, some clear purpose. But they feel like they've cut themselves off from God and are even a little afraid even to think about spiritual matters because they fear that if they look into the things of God too much, they'll find that he really is as far away from them as they feel that he is.

[13 : 47] Or how about the person who's been brought up going to church and has always kept going? But though they want to be religious, and want to feel that they belong to God's family, they just have this gnawing feeling deep down inside that something's not right between themselves and God.

And they feel somehow that even though they've tried to stay close, that they're far away from God. Do you feel that you're far away from God?

Feeling that your life, with all its failures, puts a dark distance between yourself and God? Is there any good news for anyone who finds themselves in such a state?

Or is it hopeless? Is there any good news for you? Is there any hope? Or is there nothing but the despair of distance and the separation of shame?

Where is the gospel? Where is the good news? The good news is not far away.

[15 : 14] In fact, the good news is very near, closer than you might imagine. the two sections of Scripture that we've read today, both say the same thing at different points, though in slightly different words, and there we find a key.

What phrase is that? In Matthew, the kingdom of heaven is at hand, hand, and in Mark, the kingdom of God is at hand.

But what exactly does that mean? What are these phrases talking about? Does this mean that judgment is about to happen?

Well, no, that's really to misunderstand what's being said. Maybe a more contemporary way to translate these words might be, the kingdom of God is close by.

What's the good news in that? What is the good news in the kingdom of God is close by? The good news in this is the fact that Jesus has come.

[16 : 38] He is the king of his kingdom, and if the kingdom is near, then the king is near. God, our king, is close by.

Jesus, our king, is here. So close you can reach out and touch him. That's what the woman who was bleeding for 12 years understood.

She had a hemorrhage problem, and it was painful, it was uncomfortable, it was something that made life very difficult for her because people didn't want to be around her.

It made her ritually unclean in the sight of many. But she understood that Jesus was near, so she reached out and touched just the edge of his clothes, and she was healed.

healed. She'd suffered horribly for years on end, being conned by money-grubbing quack doctors who said they could heal her, but in reality they were just taking advantage of her desperation.

[17 : 53] But now Jesus in all his power and compassion is close by. She reaches out to touch him, and she's healed.

But someone will say, Jesus isn't here anymore. We can't touch him. Isn't he far away from us? The Apostle Paul said when he was speaking with those he met in Athens, he said this, he is actually not far from each one of us, for in him we live and move and have our being.

God is to him. And there's something else that we can notice from our own lives. And every one of us, if we look at our lives, we can see this.

The fact that we're not destroyed in every instant of time that passes, points us inexorably to the fact that he is near, offering you grace, offering you pardon, offering you himself.

As the Apostle Peter says, the Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

[19 : 33] The fact is, as John saw in his vision, Christ is standing at the door knocking. Behold, I stand at the door and knock.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me.

Remember, these words weren't even written for those who don't believe, but for the people of God. But in a sense, they still teach every one of us, regardless of our position, that Christ in the gospel is knocking at our door.

And in case you do feel left out because you know these words were written first of all to the church, listen to this man's story. His name was Mr.

Li. It's a very common name in China and that's exactly where he was from. He lived in communist China not terribly long ago.

[20 : 46] But Mr. Li was a very bad man. He was heavily involved in the black market and so long as he could make a little money.

He wasn't particularly fussy about how he would make that money. And he made some very bad decisions. And all this began to catch up with him.

He found out that he was being sought by the police for crimes that he himself knew that he had committed and they were serious crimes.

And he knew fine well that he was guilty. And at last having been confronted with his own guilt it actually began to eat him up.

Before then it hadn't really bothered him all that much but now he knew he was guilty. He knew the law was after him and he began to feel guilty himself. He began to realize that these were not good things that he'd done.

[21 : 58] And this guilt was really beginning to bother him. So he started to try and find someone who could help him with this guilt.

And he'd heard about a local Chinese missionary, a local evangelist, who he'd heard preached about forgiveness of sin and the cleansing away of guilt.

guilt. So Mr. Lee sought out this missionary and he went to see him. This missionary didn't say an awful lot to him but he told him that if he were to go and find the Bible and to read Genesis 1 in that Bible that he would read there about the God who speaks.

And Mr. Lee wasn't particularly happy with this advice but he thought he'd give it a shot anyway seeing he'd made the effort of going to see him.

So Mr. Lee went away and he used his contacts in the black market to get hold of a Bible which of course was hard to come by in China and still is relatively hard to come by.

[23 : 22] and there in that Bible he read Genesis chapter 1 and he thought about that chapter a bit. What he read didn't make a huge impression on him other than that he was a little surprised at the fact that this God just spoke and the word, the world rather, came into existence existence because God spoke the word.

That was a thing that really stuck with him. Feeling that this wasn't really all that helpful, he went back to the missionary and he asked him if there was anything else that might help him with his guilt.

The missionary told him to read in Genesis 6 about the God who weeps. So off Mr. Lee went and read there about the flood.

And because he was Chinese and very into symbolism, he interpreted the flood as showing the grief of God over the wickedness that was in the world.

And Mr. Lee found that reading this actually made his own sense of guilt even worse than it was before. So he made his way back to the missionary to demand something else, something that would actually help him with his guilt.

[24 : 51] The missionary just told him to read Matthew chapter 8 about the God who sleeps. So off Mr. Lee went and read about Jesus asleep in the boat with his disciples.

Now he was amazed at this. He was amazed at how the disciples who were fishermen were terrified in the midst of this storm. But Jesus who wasn't a seafarer was so calm that he slept through the storm.

But what really captured his imagination was how Jesus spoke and this terrible storm simply subsided.

Mr. Lee realized that the reason Jesus was not afraid was because he was God.

He was the one who had spoken the world into being and now spoke and the storm became a calm. Mr. Lee believed.

[26 : 04] But a mother of days later he was arrested for his earlier crimes. He was sentenced to death. No one came to see Mr. Lee on death row.

Not even his mother. But the day before his execution the missionary came and he asked Mr. Lee if he had read about the God who sleeps.

Mr. Lee said that he had and the missionary made as if to go and Mr. Lee said to him I'm no longer afraid to die Jesus is with me in the boat the God who is near.

The good news for you is not that you can get things no matter how sublime or glorious these things might be the good news is that Jesus is offering you himself.

You might think that you have health salvation or even eternal life but unless you have Jesus you have nothing. He is the good news and every other good gift can only be found in him.

[27 : 35] There's a song that says you just call out my name and you know wherever I am I'll come running to see you again.

Winter spring summer or fall all you have to do is call and I'll be there you've got a friend. but no one can be that close all the time can they?

No matter how much they want to be but Jesus is that near. He is that close and he is that kind of friend the friend that is closer than any other.

Let's pray let's stand. Heavenly Father we thank you for the wonder of the gospel the wonder of our glorious Savior Jesus Christ and we pray Heavenly Father that you would open our eyes to see the glory of Jesus.

Lord we know we're so slow to understand these things we're so slow to take them to heart we say other people need these things and we don't see that we need them ourselves that we need Jesus every single one of us we need our Lord and without him we are nothing help us Lord to submit our hearts and our lives to you and to fall in love with Jesus to see that he is the one who has shown us the greatest love of all a love that is eternal a love that is divine and the love that compelled him to go to the cross to die that horrible death that our sins might be forgiven may our sins truly be forgiven in

[30 : 05] Jesus Amen