

Access to God

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Preacher: Daniel Ralph

[0 : 00] If you can turn, please, in your Bibles to Mark chapter 1.

So Mark chapter 1, and we're going to read the first 12 verses, sorry, up to the end of verse 11.

Now hear God's Word. The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

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. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

And he preached, saying, In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

[2 : 06] And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

And a voice came from heaven, saying, You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased. Well may God bless his Word to us this morning.

We're going to come back to that in its message form in a moment. But before that we'll stand once more before God in song. Well if you have Mark's Gospel in front of you it will be helpful.

And as I made aware last week we're going to be going through the New Testament book by book. Looking at the priority of Christ in each book. And of course each book of the New Testament reveals something about Christ that the other one might.

But sometimes it might not. In other words, it's a bit like looking at an island and everybody seeing it from the mainland from a different position.

[3 : 32] You'll notice something that's different from what the other person notices. Simply because of where you're standing. In the same way Mark is standing in a different location to where Matthew is.

And so he allows us to see things that Matthew doesn't reveal. But the synoptics, which is Matthew, Mark and Luke, generally reveal the same truths.

However, the way they structure those truths is important. So this morning, as we get into the text, Mark is just an absolute genius of how he structures his Gospel to show us really important things about Jesus that he doesn't want us to miss.

And he does this simply by ordering the material in a very particular way. Not in a way that's confusing, but in a way that allows you to see the main point that he is getting at.

Back in the day, back in the early 1900s, there was a minister by the name of Austin Farrar. He wrote one of the best books ever written on the Gospel of Mark in explaining it.

[4 : 40] And he brilliantly shows the reader of his book, and of course the reader of Mark's Gospel, that Mark opens up like a creation week. There are six evening passages in Mark.

And then it was evening, just like you get in the creation account. And so what Austin Farrar pointed out is that the Gospel of Mark is like a new creation account that Jesus brings about through entering into this world.

It's a wonderful picture of just how beautifully Mark has put his Gospel together, that Mark would have us understand that Jesus is the one who brings about a new creation.

There's another structure in Mark which is much easier to spot and perhaps even easier to understand, and that Mark is split into two halves. You've got 16 chapters. The first eight is simply answering the question, who is Jesus?

The second eight is simply answering the question, why Jesus must die? Mark begins his Gospel by telling us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and then spends eight chapters showing us who Jesus is, that he is who Mark says he is, the Son of God.

[5 : 58] That's the conclusion that you ought to come to after reading the first eight chapters. But then in the second eight, you've got that transition period where Jesus is telling his disciples, I have to die on a cross, and they just don't get it.

And so for the remainder of Mark's Gospel, you have the explanation for why Jesus must die. I guess I want to bring out another structure which is fairly easy to see, and that those who are not God's people in Mark's Gospel, a bit like Luke's in many ways, are quite prominent.

The Jews, who are meant to believe in God, don't, you know, they have their moments throughout Mark, but then there are others who just sort of clearly show a level of faith that is just extraordinary.

One of the women in particular is a Syrophoenician woman, who in her very famous statement says, yes, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table.

I mean, I just can't even begin to tell you just how good a statement that is to Jesus, just exactly what she knew. I mean, she was a smart cookie, but she obviously appreciated and knew who Jesus was.

[7 : 19] The structure I guess I want to point out to you this morning is in what we have read, that in some Bibles it mentions the word that the heavens were torn open. In other Bibles it just says that the heavens opened, but you get the same picture.

Nevertheless, this word torn is pretty important in Mark's Gospel. Here in verse 10 and 11, you have this picture of the heavens being torn open.

And then at the end of Mark's Gospel, you have the picture of the curtain in the temple being torn open from top to bottom.

And so Mark's Gospel begins and ends with something being torn open. And you've got to ask yourself the question, what's on the other side? The heavens are being torn open.

Okay, what's on the other side? Well, the short answer is God's on the other side. Mark, when describing Jesus dying on the cross, it says that Jesus breathed his last.

[8 : 25] And the next verse does not take you to Jesus dying on the cross. It takes you right across to the temple. He switches your view, the camera view, to focus on the temple.

And the next verse it says that the temple and the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom. Torn open, okay. But what's on the other side? God is on the other side.

And so what Mark is showing us throughout his Gospel is very, very simple. If I can rephrase it. Who is the person that will give us access to God?

And how will that person do it? And his answer? Jesus, the Son of God, by dying on the cross in our place. That's the beauty of Mark's Gospel.

Who is it that will give us access to God? And how will that person do it? Jesus Christ, the Son of God, I must die on the cross, Jesus says.

[9 : 26] So Mark gives us this beautiful picture of how you who do not belong to God get to be on the side where God is. The heavens open up, the temple curtain is torn, and you enter into the very presence of God because of the accomplishment of Jesus.

And so this priority is really the priority that Mark wants you to see. That Jesus is the person who does the will of the Father so that you can have access to the Father.

That Jesus Christ is the one, the Son of God, promised one, who will bring you into relationship with God through his accomplishment on the cross.

And so Mark has, again, this beautiful picture of just how simply that's going to happen. That the one who came from above, the heavens opened up, indicating to us that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came from above, is the one who will bring you above through his accomplishment on the cross.

The heavens are torn open in the beginning, indicating where Jesus comes from, and the temple curtain is torn open in the end, indicating that you will have access to God because of what Jesus Christ has done.

[10 : 52] So remember the question, who will give us access to God and how will that person do it? And the answer is, Jesus will give us access to God and he will do it by his death on the cross.

Now, once you've understood that, it rules out a lot of other things, doesn't it? That all of a sudden, that if that is how a person has access to God, then all the other ways that a person might think is possible, don't even figure into the equation.

You don't even get close. Well, I'm a good person. Okay. You may be a good person, but you're not good enough. Okay. Well, why aren't I good enough?

Well, because the demands of a holy life are far beyond anything that we can achieve. However, isn't it much better to rather receive the gift of eternal life through the one who's accomplished it?

No, I don't want that. Why not? Because I want to be able to do it myself. You know, that's another thing that comes out in Mark, doesn't it? This idea of, no, I'm sure that if I just try hard enough, if I'm just a little bit different, then I'm sure I can get access to God all by myself.

[12 : 08] In other words, I don't need the one that God sent. No, you really do need the one that God sent. And it really is about an access issue that people almost naturally believe that they have access to God.

And yet, what Jesus is pointing out here in the gospel, or Mark's pointing out through his account, is it's not the case. The reason your prayers are answered is because of Jesus.

The reason you'll get to be with God in the end is because of Jesus. And therefore, it's no different for anybody else in the world. The answer is still Jesus.

The priority is still Jesus. One of the ways that Jesus shows this in the gospel of Mark is in the account, you'll remember when he rides into Jerusalem, and he goes into the temple, and he throws out the money exchanges.

And you think, you know, good on you. Maybe not. You wouldn't want to be those type of people that were doing that and come across that kind of correction of Jesus. But Mark, again, never leaves pictures all by themselves.

[13 : 20] He puts pictures together so that we can get a true picture of what's going on. And so right beside Jesus dealing with those in the temple, you have this picture, this image of Jesus cursing a fig tree because it has no fruit on it.

Jesus wanders into the temple, and then he quotes from Jeremiah 7. You'll remember the quote. You know, even if you don't remember that it comes from Jeremiah 7, you'll know what Jesus says.

What does he say? He says, My father's house is not meant to be used for this. My father's house is to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers.

You've made it a den of robbers. And then the mistake would be to think that they must be robbing the people through the exchanging of money. That's not what they're doing. You've got to ask the question, if Jesus is accusing them of turning the temple into a place of robbery, you've got to ask the question, What's being robbed?

And who is it being robbed from? Well, what is the temple meant for? Well, my house, the house of the Lord is to be used for what? A prayer for all nations.

[14 : 28] And here you are, having turned it into a sort of bank. In other words, God is being robbed. You're robbing God, and you're robbing God in such a way where the prayers that he is meant to receive from his people in the place of the temple cannot happen because you are using the temple for a reason that it's not meant to be used for.

It is meant to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you have made it a den of robbers. You are robbing God. Okay. But they're also robbing the people.

Again, not of money, but of the opportunity to be able to come before God in prayer in the temple. If the temple is for that reason, and it's being used for a different purpose, now suddenly the people can't come to God in the temple and pray to him because all these loans and exchanges are going on.

What are you supposed to do? Well, Jesus is telling these people as he throws them out that you're robbing in two ways. Number one, you're robbing God of the prayers that he is meant to receive, and number two, you're robbing the people of the opportunity to be able to pray to God in a way that they can have their prayers answered in the community of God's people and in the temple where God designed for it to happen.

And you get this sort of damning result. And then Jesus, depending on whether you read Matthew or Mark's gospel, because they're both the accounts, in Mark's gospel he curses the fig tree.

[16 : 06] And he curses the fig tree because he goes to it expecting to find fruit on it. There's no fruit on the fig tree when there should be. And he curses the fig tree saying, may no fruit come from you ever again.

The disciples, the next day, walk by the tree, see that it's withered down to its roots and it's come to nothing. But what does it mean? What does it mean? Well, Jesus is indicating with a fig tree what's going to happen to the temple.

That Jesus is illustrating with a fig tree what is going to happen to the temple. That because of the temple and its fruitlessness, it too will come to nothing.

Why? Because access to God will no longer be through a fruitless building, but it will be through the person of Jesus Christ.

That's the picture that Jesus wants us to see. That these things can be set up and can look so good on the outside, but they cannot achieve what they were set up to achieve.

[17 : 12] It's true that God can hear our prayers, but it cannot provide the kind of access to God that only Jesus Christ can. Now, all the way through the Old Testament and even in the New Testament, Jesus is unbelievably gracious as you would expect him to be.

But, you know, God is gracious even in the book of Jonah, for instance, that when God says he's going to judge someone, he may not. You say, well, is God indifferent?

Is God going to change his mind? No. God will judge people, but God will use the threat of judgment to get those people to change their ways. God will use the threat of judgment to get those people to repent.

Look at the book of Jonah. Jonah, you go and tell these people that in a few days they're going to be destroyed. And Jonah doesn't want to go out first, then he goes. Without a word of grace, he just says, 40 days, you're out of here.

You're gone. You're going to be destroyed. And yet God knew that the very message of judgment would be enough to wake these people up and repent of their ways.

[18 : 21] And what does he do? He doesn't destroy them. He doesn't judge them. But he leaves them alone. In much the same way, God, through the New Testament, in the person of Jesus Christ, gives these warnings that are true if you don't pay attention to them, but he gives the warnings in such a way that they are meant to cause you to turn to him.

Why? Because Jesus is the one who will open up the way for you to have access to God. Jesus is the one who can only open up the way for anybody to have access to God.

So, what does it mean? Well, it means this. Going to the temple won't get you to God. Going to church will not get you to God. Going to prayer alone will not get you to God.

In other words, you've got to understand that what Jesus is dealing here by removing the temple, it is that he is removing everything associated with the temple, the good and the bad, so that all focus and attention will be drawn to him as the one person who will provide you the access to God that you need.

And the way that he will do that, of course, is through his death on the cross and resurrection. So, do you see Mark saying, do you understand why Jesus is important?

[19 : 48] Do you understand who Jesus Christ is, that he is the Son of God? And this is why halfway through the book of Mark in chapter 8 into chapter 9, Jesus stops and he says, okay, who do people say that I am?

They've got a hundred ideas and not one of them is correct. Maybe Elijah, maybe John the Baptist, maybe a prophet, who knows? And that's the problem. Nobody knows.

Nobody could actually see who Jesus is. Then he turns to his disciples and says, well, okay, you've been with me for three and a half years. Okay, we've been together.

We've, we've ate together. You know, we've walked the same streets together. Who do you say that I am? And Peter says, you are the Christ. Bingo, you've got it.

But then the moment Jesus starts speaking about his death, Peter goes, no, Lord. You can't die. And Jesus looks at him and says, get behind me, Satan.

[20 : 57] For you do not have your mind set on the things of God but on the things of man. Just before you have that account, just before you have that little interaction between Jesus asking the question, who am I?

And people not knowing and Peter saying, you're the Christ, but they're not seeing why Jesus has to die. You have Jesus healing a blind man in two stages. And you've got to ask yourself the question, why not one?

It's like when people say about creation, how long did it take God to create? I said, I don't know. Six days. Six literal days, I would say, but I don't understand why it took so long.

When you're dealing with God and God can bring about things in a moment, okay, what does it take so long? Yeah, I believe that God created the world in six literal days, but I don't understand why six?

Why not four? Why not one? So when you get to this blind man that he heals in two stages, why? If Jesus can do it in one go, you've got to ask yourself the question, what point is he making by not doing it in one go?

[22 : 03] If Jesus can heal the blind man in one word, then why doesn't he, why does he do it in two stages? Because he wants to point out to everybody listening and to everybody watching and especially to Peter to come, that though Peter sees, you are the Christ, he doesn't see clearly.

When Jesus heals the blind man, the first question he asks them after the first part is what do you see? And the man says, I see men like trees walking. In other words, I see, but not very clearly.

So Jesus gives him a second touch and his sight is perfectly restored. Why? Because that's exactly what's going to happen to Peter.

Peter's going to go, you are the Christ, but he sees Christ like men like trees walking. He doesn't see who Christ is truly. He has a vague idea. And so Jesus needs to do more work with him so that he can understand why Jesus must die.

You know, Mark is just incredible in how he gives us these pictures to allow us to see the spiritual condition of the temple with the fig tree and the spiritual condition of Peter with the blind man who's healed in two stages.

[23 : 14] Just wonderful stuff. Why is it so important? Well, because Mark wants us to know the identity of Jesus and why he must die.

It's not sufficient enough to know one half. You have to know both. And that's what Mark is doing with Peter. What I find wonderfully interesting is that the centurion at the foot of the cross when Jesus breathed his last says this, truly this man is the son of God.

What is he seeing? What does he see in order to come to that conclusion? Well, he sees the very thing that Jesus told Peter what would happen to him.

That the son of man must be rejected, he must suffer, and he must die. And the centurion as he looks up to Jesus Christ on the cross breathing his last says, looking at a man who is rejected, who suffers, and who dies, says, truly, this man is the son of God.

Mark's point is this. You don't know who Jesus is unless you know why he had to die. You don't know who Jesus is unless you know why he had to die and had to die the way he did.

[24 : 42] You can't even become, because if you think you do, you're like, I see men like trees walking, you have a vague idea, but a true appreciation of the identity of Christ is found not only in the knowledge that he is the son of God, but he is the son of God who dies in our place.

Okay. Well, what does that mean? Well, it means access. It means access to God, access to relationship.

Jesus is the one who brings you by tearing open the way, as it were, into relationship with God himself.

Now, this idea of relationship is quite a powerful idea in Mark because what's known as Markan discipleship is quite tough. I want to be a disciple.

You go read Mark and suddenly you begin to realize just how tough it is to be a disciple. And one of the areas that makes it tough is the area of how Jesus redefines relationship.

[25 : 51] That if you know who Jesus is and you have faith in him that he has died on the cross for your sins and you have been brought into relationship with God through him, then not only does it change your relationship with God, it changes your relationship with everybody else in the world.

Okay. That's not too bad if it's the shopkeeper down the road who you're quite friendly with. It's an altogether different story when it's your husband who isn't saved or your wife who isn't saved or your children who aren't saved.

It's quite a different story when you've got quite a close family network and suddenly your relationship with God has changed and therefore your relationship with them has changed but they don't understand that.

They can't even get close to beginning to understand what kind of change it is or how it's going to change the relationship between you and them. I'll give you an example.

When Jesus is told that his family, sort of earthly family, we know that Jesus is born of God on earth through the Virgin Mary, Jesus turns around and says, who is my mother and father?

[26 : 59] No, sorry. Who is my mother and brothers? Who are they? Who are they? And then he doesn't give any room for the people to answer simply because they're not going to be able to come up with an answer but he follows it by saying, I'll tell you, those who are related to me are those who do the will of the Father.

I'll tell you who my mother and brothers and sisters are those who do the will of God, my Father. What is he saying? He's saying, look, when you're brought into a relationship with God and now you begin to do the will of God, it even changes blood ties.

It even changes blood ties. That's how deep relationship with God goes. It changes the relationship I have with my unsaved brothers.

I'm closer to Jesus than I am to them even though we're connected by blood.

That's why it's tough, isn't it? See, we all know why discipleship is tough. It's not simply because we have to follow Jesus but it's what following Jesus means for everything else that we're related to, for everything else that we are connected to.

[28 : 21] So how is a person ever going to deny themselves, take up their cross and follow Jesus? How is a person ever going to do that unless they are absolutely convinced of who Jesus Christ is and why he must die?

You're not going to. What's going to happen is you're going to enter into a life of discipleship that you think is a true version of discipleship and the blood ties kick in. and suddenly relationship for you is defined no longer by doing the will of the father but actually by doing the will of the person that you're related to either through blood or through marriage or through a potential marriage or through whatever it else may be.

Okay. That's tough, isn't it? That's tough when Jesus defines relationship in that way because we think that we can have relationship with both parties.

No, no, Jesus says it doesn't work like that. Those who are my mother, my sister, my brother, okay, are those who do the will of God the father.

Okay, here's the exhortation then as we sort of wrap it up. Mark gives us the answer to both questions. Who Jesus is and why Jesus must die.

[29 : 35] Who is it that will give us access to God and how will that person do it? The answer is of course Jesus and the way that he will do it is by his death and resurrection.

This then brings a different kind of challenge. It means that access to God affects and alters every other relationship that we have.

So let me put it abundantly clear as clear as Mark's gospel puts it. To be a follower of Christ is to deny yourself, to take up your cross, and to follow Jesus.

Jesus. Which means in a real world environment that my relationship with Christ is closer than any other blood tie that I might have or any other type of relationship I might have.

And the only way a disciple will decide to be that, why would you want to be a disciple when Jesus says, expect the same thing I received? Why would anybody want to be a disciple when they're being told that to become a disciple you must be expected also to be rejected even perhaps by your own family to suffer and potentially even death?

[30 : 48] Why would anybody ever be a disciple after hearing that kind of message? And the answer is very simple because they know who Jesus is and they know why he had to die.

It's the only answer. The only reason a person follows Jesus in denying themselves and taking up their cross is because they actually see and understand who Jesus Christ is and if you don't, you don't follow Jesus.

At least, at least not in the way that he wants us to. Here's the sort of conclusion then as we sort of wrap it up. The priority of Jesus in Mark's gospel is to give you access to God.

The priority of God in Mark's gospel is to give you Jesus so that Jesus can give you access to God. The priority for us as we read Mark's gospel is that we, in light of that, would deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.

Amen. Amen. God bless you, God bless you, you're of God.

[32 : 09] Amen. He's.