

[God's Kingdom has Arrived, Part One]

[Speakers in the audio file: Tim Mackie]

[Musical Introduction (0:00—0:08)]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, *Exploring My Strange Bible*. I am a card-carrying, Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last 20 years' worth of lectures and sermons where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible, and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith, and I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called the Bible Project. We make animated videos, podcasts, and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at BibleProject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[Musical Break (0:53—1:00)]

This episode is going to be the first of a six-part series. It represents six teachings that I gave as a part of a series back at Door of Hope, when I was a teaching pastor there a number of years ago. We challenged the whole church to read through the whole New Testament in 90 days. And then on Monday through Friday mornings, at 6 AM, for those 90 days, we met together—a group of a few hundred of us—and we would read aloud the couple of chapters for that day, and then, kind of, give a short teaching or exposition. And then on Sundays, as we went through those 90 days, we just keyed in on whatever key texts that we had read that week and used it as a way—the Sunday teaching series—as a way to explore major themes and ideas throughout the whole New Testament.

So this first message that I gave was about the introduction to Jesus and his message and mission that's offered in the Gospel of Mark, chapter one. And essentially, it's a way of trying to help us, as modern Western folks, reorient ourselves to the actual message and teaching of Jesus—not the normal way; it's not the normal way that people think about Christianity or what Jesus said or did on any given day, but actually trying to recover the apostles' presentation of Jesus that we actually find in the New Testament.

So this is all about Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God. What did that even mean? Why was it so important to him? What was the kingdom of God all about? What's the bigger storyline? It helps us make sense of what Jesus thought he was doing as he started these "kingdom communities" and announced his message. So that's what this message is about. Hope you find it stimulating. Let's dive in.

[Musical Break (2:49—2:59)]

Today we're going to be looking at the first paragraphs of Mark chapter one, and it's going to, kind of, give us a framework for kicking off our next book that we're reading through, as we read through the gospels. We have six Sunday teachings where we try to choose passages that, kind of, get us to the heart of who Jesus of Nazareth is and what he's about—not just as a matter of history, but as a matter of reality. Because we're a community of people who are encountering Jesus here in our midst—individually, but also corporately—and just figuring out what it means to be his followers together as a community of people.

In Matthew chapter 16, we're confronted with this reality that Jesus is someone who never lets us sit idle to who he is. He always forces us to make a decision. And so he is interested in, yeah, "What do other people say that I am?" But then he always turns to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" And he won't let you escape having to face that question—*who do you say that Jesus is?* It's a question of allegiance, not just of facts, but just of *allegiance*. Who is your Lord? To whom have you given your allegiance? And that's what it means to be a part of a confessing community.

This week we are focusing in on Jesus's main proclamation—his main announcement, his main message—what you would have heard him teaching about on any given day. Now, I think this is an interesting question to ask. Any given day during Jesus's—he's touring around Galilee, he's touring around Judea, or something like that, and you happen upon him, and there's a crowd of people listening to him—what do you think you are likely to hear Jesus talk about on any given day? And there is a right answer.

Because it's something he clearly talked about constantly—all the time. All the time. It's funny because we think of his best-known teachings, "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," or something; "love your enemies," you know; "forgive as you've been forgiven," those kinds of teachings. And those are memorable teachings, and they're powerful. But those are not the *center* of what he was about. His message of love and of forgiveness was one piece of a much, much larger picture.

It was in an announcement. And it is what we would hear him talking about on any given day. And that is the message, or the good news, *of the kingdom*. I want you to let this sink in. If you were to, just, visually see all of the times Jesus talks about the kingdom, just in one of the gospels—the gospel of Matthew—here's what it would look like. [Tim shows the audience something] You see all the red here? It's all the times Jesus talks about “kingdom.”

And so if we're followers of this Jesus, but yet this is news to you—there's something wrong with that. Because this is what he cared about the most and talked about all of the time. We need to at least take one deep dive into what on earth Jesus means by this. Because apparently, in Jesus' message, he said, “The kingdom is here.” That's his whole announcement: “The kingdom of God is here in me.” And because of that fact, loving your enemy is the only sensible response to the fact that the kingdom of God is here. “Loving your enemy” was not the center of Jesus' teaching. It was one *outworking* of a response to this reality that the kingdom of God is here.

So already we're at a disadvantage, right? Because this language of “kings” and “kingdoms” belongs to the same realm for us as, like, “princesses.” Kings and kingdom—like “we don't have a king; we don't live in a kingdom.” And I guess there are still quite a number of kingdoms on this earth. Some of them are real kings by power; some of them are symbolic kings and queens, and so on. But this language doesn't have traction with us for the most part.

And so we need to just pause for a moment and get at the big idea of what's going on here. Because you may not talk about “kings” and “kingdoms” and so on, but the fact is that what the biblical theme of “the kingdom” and what Jesus comes to announce actually touches on a reality that's close to every single one of us. And it addresses issues in our lives and realities that we face every day.

The core issue in the story of the whole Bible—it's essentially—the story of the Bible is the story about the kingdom of God. It's one way of thinking about it. It answers this question: “Who's running the show?”

Look out the window, read a newspaper, go to town—whatever—see lots of people, and just yell out loud the question: “Who's in charge here?” And if you were to ask one of the biblical poets, or one of the ancient prophets, that question, which is the tradition out of which Jesus came, there would be one very clear answer to that.

So let's just sample one place in the ancient Scriptures. The Scriptures on which Jesus was raised and found himself. And one passage from the ancient Scriptures, Psalm 93: “The Lord, he reigns as king. He's robed in majesty. The Lord is robed. He's girded with strength. He has established the world. It shall never be moved. Your throne”—now

addressing the Lord as king—“your throne is established from of old, you are from everlasting.”

And we can multiply passage upon passage—many, many passages. The biblical poets and the prophets—it's just a core axiom; a core tenet of a Jewish-Christian worldview: “Yahweh, the Lord.” And he's the Lord and king because he's the author of reality. He's the one “running the show.”

Now, some of us are totally fine with saying that, and—“Yeah, of course; yeah, God is king.” There's a whole bunch of others of us who are like, “Yeah, but...so if God is king, then how do I explain all of the horrible, screwed up things happening in the world,” right? So I'm happy to say that God is king and creator and author of everything that's good when I'm watching a sunset, you know, with a friend; when I'm hearing a child laugh, or whatever; when I'm moved by a piece of music or poetry, and I'm experiencing beauty and transcendence—happy to say that God is king in a moment like that.

But the fact is that for every child laughing, there's a child dying; every piece of beautiful music or beautiful piece of poetry, there is a tragic song being sung at a funeral of someone who's been murdered; a piece of poetry that's exploring the depression and the angst and the agony of the poet.

And so while we can affirm that God is king, somehow we have to also be able to affirm that there are things happening in God's kingdom that don't seem to reflect the fact that he is king. Things seem out of control. And here's what's interesting is—that it's not blasphemous to say that, first of all, because the biblical poets and prophets were also quite aware of this as well.

So let's sample the next poem in the book of Psalms: Psalm 94, which begins by saying, “Rise up, O ruler of the earth. Repay the arrogant what they deserve. O Lord, how long will the wicked triumph? They pour out their arrogant words, and all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O Lord. They oppress your chosen people; they kill the widow and the sojourner, they murder the fatherless. They say, ‘The Lord doesn't see; the God of Jacob doesn't perceive.’”

And so even within the Scriptures themselves, there's an awareness of this tension. And this is not abstract theology. So this is the world in which we live. And we have moments of beauty, and of goodness and joy in our lives, or in our relationships. And some of us—most of us—will be *happy* to affirm that this is a gift of God. And yes, he's the author of creation, author of all beauty and goodness. But then we have these other moments—sometimes, like, in relationship with the very same people who just brought us joy, and now they're bringing us grief—you know what I'm saying? Or now we're bringing them grief.

And we encounter moments of terrible tragedy, and so on—and pain; physical pain, relational pain. Things that are happening in God's world that don't seem to be what God's will should be if he were, in fact, king. And so all of us—this is not just abstract theology—this is a question every one of us faces. This is the Bible's way of talking about the problem of evil and suffering in our world.

If God is, in fact, a good, all-powerful king, why does all this horrible stuff happen? Is God really king? And then we come into instances of pain and crisis and so on, and then we begin to doubt, or we wonder. We think, “Has God fallen asleep on the job? Or maybe he never was king after all? Or maybe he doesn't exist after all, because could God actually be king, or exist, and have this kind of horror be happening in his good world?”

This is not a new problem. This is part of the human story and the wrestling match with what it means for God to be king. One way the Bible story is working out an answer to this problem is: the story of “the kingdom.” And part of it is that we skip a very important moment right at the beginning of the story that is actually part of the Scripture's very profound answer to the problem of evil and suffering in our world, and how we reconcile it with the fact that God is king.

And it's found in a well-known statement that we don't often tie into this whole line of ideas—and it's found in Genesis chapter one. And it's this “commissioning statement” about humanity: “What are humans here for? Why are we here and what are we here to do?”

Genesis one, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness.’” There are a million books that have been written on this, and so on, and I can't summarize it in 30 seconds. But whatever's happening here, humanity is a creature—in the vision of the biblical story—that is “from the earth,” from dirt—because we obviously return back to it after we die. And we're very much like the creatures of the earth, and so on. We're “from the earth;” we're “intimately connected to the earth.”

But there are also these things about us that seem to transcend, just, our biology. We're capable of love, and we have this sense of moral awareness and justice that seems to, actually, *go against* so much of what we see going on amongst the animal kingdoms, and so on.

Do you ever see, like, beetles protesting the fact that they're getting stepped on or something—you know? Like, no, but we have this *moral* awareness that it's actually wrong to “step on” another human. Where did you get that? And there are debates about that, and so on—but we have this moral awareness. We have this capacity for love and relationships—something spiritually transcendent about a human being and our awareness of the divine, and so on.

And so what are humans—who are made to have this unique relationship to each other and this unique relationship to the Creator—what are we here to do? And what is the language of Genesis one? This is very profound: What are we here to do? “Let them rule over the fish of the sea, and the birds of the air; the cattle and the wild animals”—remember that, the wild animals—“of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” It's the language of “kingdom” and “kingship.”

So God is king in the world, in the story of the Bible, because He's the author of all that is. But God has chosen to bestow upon these particular creatures—human beings—a chance to partner in the rule of His world. A chance to share and have real, moral responsibility in the ruling of this world.

And we might use a different metaphor, like “live” or “stewarding” or “having responsibility” or “making choices,” or whatever—but this is a vision of humanity. We're here to be, like, “little rulers” under the capital “r” ruler—something like that. God is king, but then humans are given the responsibility of having *real* responsibility in God's world.

Now, if you're to have *real* responsibility, does that create and open up the possibility for all of this to go horribly wrong? Answer—but yet, if the possibility of it never going horribly wrong didn't exist, would it be a *real* responsibility? Answer: *No*. All right? *No*, of course not.

And so, part of the Bible's answer to this question is that God's will is not the only will that matters in the story of our world after this point. There are other wills that determine how things go down here. And if that's a *real* responsibility that you and I, as humans, have, then the story of this world is going to be a story of “a clash of kingdoms”—if the humans turn away, at least.

And what do the humans do two pages later? Right? They turn away. And they turn away because they give in to these “powers of deception” and—dark powers of evil that are *personal* in some way. And where did evil come from that preceded human beings? The Bible doesn't give any answer to that whatsoever—at least I don't think so. It's just *there*.

And the humans give in to this urge for independence and autonomy and—to seize the opportunity for our own rule, and to create our own little kingdom here—or push out the creator and his vision of what it means to be a human being. That's the storyline of the Bible. And who's going to win? Who's going to win? So the question is: *How* is God going to win? And so the story of the Bible works out God's response to this hostile takeover of the humans—of his kingdom, essentially.

And so God chooses one people through whom he's going to restore blessing to all nations. That guy's name is Abraham; Genesis chapter 12. And here's one little people group that God is going to restore his kingdom among. And so he frees them from

slavery; he brings them into the promised land, and they set up a kingdom—and how does that story go? It's just the same story all over again. Right?

And so now there are two problems in the story of the Bible. You have a broken humanity, and then you have a broken, screwed-up, sinful Israel, which is supposed to somehow be the vehicle of salvation to the rest of the broken—and everything's just screwed up, right? This is the story of “the kingdom.”

And so when Jesus comes onto the scene—Mark chapter one—Mark's way of introducing Jesus to us. His first words in the gospel of Mark are not, “Love your enemy,” though that's a really good teaching and you should follow it—but you won't be able to follow it unless you understand the message of the kingdom.

Mark chapter one, verse 14, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God, saying, ‘The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.’” This is Mark's way of summarizing the teaching of Jesus. If you're doing the verse memorization stuff—you take one set of verses, or whatever, for each of the 90 days, as you do the “fellowship” or the “burning heart” in the little journal—this is a great one to do for yesterday, because it's Mark's summary of the very essence of Jesus' message.

And what Jesus is doing here—he's picking up on echoes of those same, ancient Scriptures—of the story of what God was going to do to reassert his kingship; to take over the kingdoms of this world and reassert his own reign over the world.

In the background of Jesus' words right here—about “the gospel of God” or “the time is fulfilled,” that God is coming to reign and be king—are passages, like this, from the prophets: Isaiah chapter 40 or 42. The prophet says, “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news.”

The Greek word for “good news,” the word *euangelion*, from which we get our English word “evangelical.” The word *euangelion* refers to “good news,” and specifically in the ancient world, it referred to good news *about a king*. So when a king won a battle or something like that, or he came onto the throne as a new king, heralds would go out throughout the known world, announcing *euangelion*; a new king has come to reign. It's the *euangelion*. The word “evangelical” means “good news-centered.” The word has been hijacked, of course, in modern America to mean something else entirely, but this is what the word means—at least originally.

“Get up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of the *euangelion*. Lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news. Lift it up. Don't be afraid. Say to the cities of Judah, ‘Here is your God. Look, the Lord God, he's coming with might. His arm is’—doing what?—‘It's ruling. It's ruling. He's the king. He's the king. His reward is with him. His recompense is before him.’”

The story of the kingdom is the story about—there would come a time in Israel's story, and in the story of humanity, where God would come again in a new, surprising way and reassert his rule and his reign. But then, two chapters later, in the prophet Isaiah, you have another announcement—in chapter 42—where we're introduced to a “servant.”

God says, “Here is my servant whom I uphold. He's my chosen one in whom I am very pleased”—remember those words. “I have put my Spirit upon him, and he will bring forth justice to the nations.” So there's a promise that God himself would come again, one day, to reassert his rule and his reign, but then, also, that a servant—a king, a Messiah—would come to reassert God's rule and his reign; He would be empowered by the Spirit and bring justice to the nations.

All of this is just looming in the background as Jesus steps onto the scene. And he says—this is the essence of his message—“Here it is. It's finally here. The time has come. God has come to reassert his kingship.”

Now, if you look at Isaiah, real quick again here, who does it say—in Isaiah 40, who is going to show up and bring the kingdom? Isaiah 40? *God himself is*. According to Isaiah 42, who is going to show up and bring the kingdom? *The servant, the king, the Messiah*. So which one is going to do it? *God himself or the king and the Messiah?* Welcome to Mark chapter one.

So let's go back up to verse one and let's trace the steps that lead up to Jesus being identified as the one who brings the kingdom. And as we do so, I just want you to keep the question in the back of your mind: *Who's in charge around here?* And this is not an abstract question. This touches on the essence of what it means to be a human in a world full of beauty and goodness, but in a world [also] full of pain and tragedy. *And what is God doing about it?* It's the story of the kingdom.

Mark chapter one, first sentence, “The beginning of the *euangelion*, the good news,”—which already, in your mind, is, “Oh, this is a message about a king,” just from this very word. “The beginning of the *euangelion*, the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Is “Christ” Jesus's last name? No, it's a title that means *king*—“anointed king.” So I'm just in the habit now of mentally, whenever I see the word “Christ,” I just say the word “king” in my head. It helps me remember that that's what it's actually saying here: “The beginning of the royal announcement about Jesus, the King, who is the Son of God.”

Now let's just stop, real quick, here. The beginning of Mark is absolutely brilliant. I've been told I use that word a lot, but I *really* mean it this time. [Laughter] So—this is absolutely brilliant. So what's going to happen here, in Mark chapter one, verses one through 15, is like “the prologue” to the entire gospel.

These opening verses—very quick; a lot of things are going to be thrown at you right now, between here and verses one through 15—and you've already had a lot of things thrown at you—but there's more coming. And the best kind of image—at least it's helpful for me, in thinking about what Mark chapter one, verses one through 15 are doing—is to think about the nature of movie posters in modern American culture. Movie posters.

Let me just say—don't show it yet, but I'm just kind of curious. I was seven months old when this movie came out, but there is a movie poster that's etched in my memory—and that also is etched, probably, in many of yours—that the moment I hear it or think of it, the whole story comes to my head.

How many of you have the original, vintage *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1976)? How many of you have that poster in your mind right now? Who's standing front and center? Luke Skywalker—holding a light ... *No*, not a lightsaber. He's holding a laser gun—and he's pointing it right at you, right? And who's the ominous figure in the background? Darth Vader, holding a lightsaber.

Now these movie posters are brilliant—and there's a whole art form—there's a whole technique to movie posters, and it's very similar to what Mark chapter one is doing. So does looking at the poster replace the experience of watching the movie? No, of course not. But every character, every scene that's there is there to remind you of something—and to summarize the entire story here, right?

You have the Empire, the Death Star, Darth Vader, and then to the left of Han, you've got Obi-Wan—and then who's underneath that? There's Governor Tarkin. There you go, Governor Tarkin. He's the architect of the Death Star—which is that big globe, the big sphere there—which destroys planets and so on. So you have Obi-Wan, and then you have Governor Tarkin.

And look, every one of these characters is telling a story. They're just little images, but they remind you, “Oh yes—and they come in at this point of the story, and it illuminates this part,” but everything serves to illuminate the character who's front and center, on whom the storyline rides, and that is Luke Skywalker.

Mark chapter one is very similar to the *Star Wars* poster, in more ways than one. At the forefront of Mark chapter one is who—verses 14 and 15? Jesus of Nazareth—not with a laser gun, so—or a lightsaber—but a word in his mouth. A word of a message proclaiming the kingdom. This movie would be titled, “Jesus and the Kingdom.”

And what's going to happen throughout the story is a quick sketch of everything that's in the background—that places Jesus in a time, in a moment, in the story of Israel, but also in the story of our whole world.

So first sentence right here—there's already a figure you should have in the back of your mind; a powerful, towering figure should appear in the background here, from verse one. First-century readers would read this, “The beginning of the good news, the *euangelion*, about *King Jesus*, the Son of God...” First-century readers would—“What? Can you say something like that? So am I going to get in trouble for reading this?” This is the kind of sentence that will actually get you in trouble if you say this aloud in Jesus' day.

There was another king, in fact, who was actually on the throne, over a piece of land that was much, much larger than the little land called “Israel,” Palestine today: the king of the Roman Empire. And about 27 years—25 years or so—before Jesus was born, there was a piece of propaganda that went out—at his birth, and also about when he was enthroned as king. And it was a piece of propaganda that exclaimed him as “the world's savior” as “the son of the gods,” who was here—well, let's just read it, right?

This is an inscription from a temple built to the Caesar Augustus, king of Rome, 25—a few years before Jesus. And it reads, “Providence has ordered all things and has set them in order by giving us Caesar Augustus.” *All history has been moving forward to the moment when—who should appear on the scene?—Caesar Augustus.*

“Caesar Augustus, whom *she*”—Providence was depicted as a Greek goddess—“whom she, the goddess Providence, has filled with *virtue*, that he might benefit all humanity. Providence has sent him as a savior for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and bring order to all things.” The birthday of this god—Caesar Augustus—was the beginning of the *euangelion* for the whole world. This predates Mark chapter one. Do you see what's happening here?

So what Mark is doing is: he's doing something very subversive, very scandalous, in saying, “Yes, we know that there are other kings that claim to be the Son of God, and that their birth was the beginning of the ‘good news.’ Let me tell you the story about King Jesus, who is the real Savior, and whose birth is the *real* beginning of the *euangelion* for our world.”

Do you see what's happening? This is very, very subtle; very sophisticated. Mark's readers would have gotten it, and they would have been scared—like, “Here, don't tell anyone I'm reading this book,” you know, right? “Don't let Caesar find out. Holy cow, there's another king—another king.” So Caesar and the Roman Empire are looming in the background of Jesus and his announcement of the kingdom.

What's another figure who's going to be in the background of our movie poster? Verse two: “Just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet”—and here a long quotation of not just Isaiah, but a couple of other prophets blended all together—“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way. And the voice of one who's

crying in the wilderness, saying, ‘Prepare the way’—for whom?—“for the Lord. Make his paths straight.”

Now again, these words—these are quoted from Isaiah chapter 40. They're actually just right in the same passage as the words from Isaiah 40 we read already, that announce the good news of the *euangelion*: “God is coming. He's going to show up.”

But before the coming of God, or his King and Messiah, there was going to come a messenger who would prepare the way. And where was that messenger going to go and announce his message? In “the wilderness.” So in the background, we would have Caesar and the Roman Empire, but we'd also have a little jar full of biblical scrolls to remind you that everything that's happening here is a part of a long story leading up to this culminating moment.

And who's the messenger? Verse four, “A messenger will appear before me ...” and so on, “make the path straight ...” And behold, who should appear before us? John. “John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem, they were going out to him, and they were being baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.”

A bit on John's fashion taste, “Now John was clothed with camel's hair. And he wore a leather belt around his waist.” And a bit on his diet, “He ate locusts and wild honey.” [Laughter] It's so great. The Bible's so weird.

So what's happening? So he retreats to the wilderness, to the Jordan. He's crazy—he's wearing animal skins, and belts, and eating bugs and honey—which means he's surviving, just, off the raw materials of the land, and so on.

And what's he doing out here? He has this message that “all Israel needs to repent and come get dunked underwater.” *What?* So this seems weird to us—but again, this is all a part of the storyline of the Scriptures. Everything John is doing is symbolic. What else happened there at the Jordan River in the wilderness—say about 1,200 years or so earlier than John the Baptist? What took place there? Well, it's the very place that Israel, after being freed from the Exodus, came in, crossed through the Jordan, under the leadership of—who?—Joshua, and then came into the promised land. And how did that story work itself out, right? Of Israel “being in the land” and “starting a kingdom” and so on? Yeah, they became horribly corrupt, just like the rest of humanity.

And so what John is essentially doing is, he is symbolically—it's like he's saying, “Let's start Israel over again. Let's go do the whole ‘walk through the river’ again. Let's confess that we have royally screwed up everything God called us to be and do as his people—confess our sins—and let's start this ‘Israel thing’ over again.” That's what he's doing. He's starting a renewal movement—or a revival, amongst the people of Israel, because

the king's coming. God is going to come back, and he's going to reassert his kingdom, and he's going to do it right this time.

Which is exactly what he says next. Verse seven, “And he was preaching. He was saying, ‘After me is coming someone who's *mightier* than me, the strap of whose sandals I am not even *worthy* to stoop down and untie.’” In other words: “somebody who is of royalty; I'm not even worthy to tie his shoes. You know? He's a king. See, I've been baptizing you just with water here. See, but this one's going to come, and he will immerse you—baptize you—with the Holy Spirit; with God's personal presence.”

This was also a promise from the storyline of the Scriptures: that when God comes to establish his kingdom again—when the king and the Messiah come—that God's people will be flooded with his personal presence and a new awareness of his reality. And this is precisely what John says.

We have Caesar Augustus in the background. We have the Roman Empire. We have a jar full of the Scriptures. And then we have a crazy guy—crazy beard, whatever, wearing animal hair, and he's eating a cricket. And he's announcing down by a river— right? That's the next image in the background, here, of Jesus.

And then we're going to have a little scene, maybe—like, if Jesus is going like *this*, and he's proclaiming his message, there's going to be a little scene, down by the Jordan River. And this is the scene, right here. Verse nine, “In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and he was baptized by John in the Jordan. When he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open—ripped open—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.’”

I am well pleased. Does that ring any bells? Isaiah chapter 42, verse one, that we just read a moment ago—when Isaiah said: God introduces his servant, “With him, I am well pleased.” So God is just, kind of, quoting his own previous speech here. He's recycling his words from Isaiah 42. And the first words, “You are my son,” are from Psalm two. And “my beloved son” is a little peppering from Genesis, chapter 22, verse three. I'll let you go read it. So God is just recycling his own words from the past and putting them into a new form right here.

This is a declaration of Jesus's identity. “Who is this Jesus?”—who's bursting onto the scene in this movie poster here? Well, we know that his birth and appearing is the beginning of the good news. And we know that He's King Jesus. And we know that He's the Son of God. But notice what's happening in the scene at the baptism here. This is very mysterious, and most of what I'm about to say, I don't really understand.

So you have the Father announcing this message over the Son—and *who* is the one who's *mediating* the reality and the presence of that love and acceptance of the Son by the Father? Who's the one in between the two? The Spirit.

So the word “trinity” doesn't appear here, but I don't know what else you would be looking for, right? And Mark's not trying to teach about the Trinity. He's just *assuming* it. You have to assume it to make sense of Jesus' teachings and talking about his relationship to the Father and the Spirit and so on.

And so you have this very powerful scene where Jesus is, like—he's publicly recognized for who he really is and what he's here to do. He's the royal son, empowered by the Spirit. He's connected to the Father. He comes from the Father. Because who's going to show up to bring the kingdom again one day? Is it going to be God or the Messiah, the King? Both. And so we have exactly that “bothness,” represented right here. My little lecture on the Trinity is now over. But that's very powerful. So that's Jesus standing right here, on the movie poster, and you have Jesus and the—I don't know, a cloud, or something, and the dove reminding us of who this king really is.

What does the Spirit then do to Jesus? Verse 12, “The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness—cast him into the wilderness.” And you're like, “Why? What did Jesus do? Why is he supposed to be there?” There's a showdown. This is almost like the little climax of this introduction to the Gospel of Mark.

He's driven into the wilderness, “and he was in the wilderness for 40 days, being tested or tempted”—by whom?—“by the *Satan*.” And also, who else was he hanging out with there? *Wild animals*. Only the Gospel of Mark includes this little detail. “He was hanging out with wild animals.”

Okay, now, just a couple of things going on here—so this is the real showdown. Verse one might make you think, “Oh, is Jesus just another one of these Jewish, messianic kings, who's here to start a revolution, and so on, and get a little band of followers and start a battle, and then the Romans are going to march into town and squash them?” Because there were plenty of those around—before and after. Is Jesus one of those?

Who is Jesus *really* here to do battle with? Evil. He's here to bring to a head the storyline, the plot-conflict, of the entire human story—the whole story of the Bible. Caesar and the rulers of Israel—they just happen to be the most recent, “animated puppets” of the powers of evil that are at work, duping humanity into thinking that autonomy from God is actually the best thing for us—these dark powers of evil.

“Satan” is almost always used in the New Testament with—at least in Greek—with the word “the” in front of it, though it's not often reflected in our translations. I think it's a title, and it's a Hebrew word that means “opposer,” or “adversary”—the personified presence of evil; personal reality of evil.

And some of us might snicker at this. It's certainly, like, a dismissed idea in our modern world. He certainly doesn't have horns, whatever this thing is—right?—personified evil. So the horns and the pitchfork, that whole thing—like, that's all later mythology that's been layered on top of the Bible. [Laughter]

What the Bible is actually trying to tell us is very sophisticated: it's that evil, it's a reality that transcends any one human being, and—all of our acts of evil—and it's something that's pernicious, and it keeps popping its head up. And just when you think you've gotten over your own “personal evil,” it pops up again, right? And it just keeps coming back and back, and humanity seems to be spinning its wheels in the mud—and “Why does this keep happening to us? Why is it that even though we know the things that we ought to be doing as image-bearing creatures, we can never actually do them?”

And not only do we not do them, we get together as collectives and not do them; and then we create societies that are not doing them, and societies that are built on the backs of other humans who are totally being crushed, you know?

This is just the human story. I could tell you that story about the 21st century, or the 19th, or the 10th. The *Satan*, the opposer—there are powers of evil at work. Jesus is here to deal with those. It's a core claim. So actually, replacing Caesar—Caesar becomes like Governor Tarkin—right?—a small, little head. And the big imposing enemy in the background is *the Satan*. And I don't know how you want to draw that character. I suggest you don't. But he's there—like a shadow or something.

And what happens? Jesus is there. He's with the wild animals—such a strange little detail. The best I can get is that Mark is portraying Jesus as a “new Adam.” He's being commissioned again, and reliving Adam's experience and testing. Only does he fail, or does he win? Yeah, we're not actually told. Do you notice this—right? He was with the wild animals. The angels are ministering to him. And what happens next? He shows up preaching the kingdom.

So notice, even, how Jesus' own victory over evil—he does what no human beforehand has been able to do, which is resist evil entirely; and Matthew and Luke both fill in the stories of the testing of Jesus, but Mark just leaves it right there. All we're told is that he shows up on the scene announcing the *euangelion* as the victorious king, right? It's a good story, yeah?

What does this have to do with me and with you? Remember, this has *everything* to do with me and you, because the question of the kingdom is about the question of *who's running this show?* Who's in charge around here? Here's the mystery, and I think what's so profound—and what makes this verse, Mark chapter 1, verse 15, worth memorizing is: Jesus is saying, “The kingdom of God,” he says, “it's here right now. In fact, it's so *here* and right now and at hand that you need to repent and believe in the *euaggelion*.”

You need to respond right now. There's no time. You need to make your decision. How are you going to respond to this?"

I think there's a distortion of all of this—that I think is very common in the church—that I think, kind of, takes the power out of what's happening here in this announcement of Jesus—kind of, takes the “sting out,” as it were.

We tend to think of the storyline of the Bible as something like this: We think of Earth, the kingdom of this world, and then we think of heaven, or we think of God's kingdom—we think of them as two separate places, as if somehow, the kingdom is, like, “a thing” or “a place” that's separate from here.

And so there are some passages in the Bible that can be misread to say that, somehow, these two worlds are separate. And so Jesus kind of floats down *here*, hangs out for a while, tells us we're all horrible, and we need to believe in him, so that one day when we die, we can escape and go *here* forever and ever. And this is some ethereal “place.” And “yeah, there's the resurrection,” or something—“but I think it's probably more about clouds, and harps,” and so on. And there you go.

I think it summarizes the way—certainly—many people perceive the message of the gospel. And some of us may hold this view too. The only problem with this view is *the Bible*, and that—if you actually read the Bible, you read that it's saying something far more interesting than this.

And what that something is—a story that goes like this—is: that God is king. He's the one who is all in all. And he makes a good world. I'm just going to say these are circles that are overlapping. That earth and heaven were, at least, made to be united or completely overlapping. In the Bible, heaven and earth—often “heaven” is used in terms of spatial language, like “up.” But of course, none of the biblical authors actually believe that God is somewhere above the atmosphere.

So when, like, the first astronauts, you know, went to the moon and so on, and—“here we are, up above the earth, and I don't see God anywhere.” And it's like, “Dude, do you think the biblical authors were idiots?” So no, of course not. They're getting at something much more profound. And so “heaven and earth” are almost like two ways of talking about two overlapping realities.

And so the Garden of Eden story is, essentially, the story of where heaven and earth were united, and God's kingdom and human kingdoms were completely ruling in harmony, and so on. And the storyline of the Bible—again, that we already traced earlier—is the storyline of how God gave these humans real decisions, real responsibility. And so human beings have “pushed God out,” so to speak, and God's allowed it to happen in some way.

And so what happens is that the human kingdoms of this world become a “sad face,” right? [Laughter] You guys get what I'm saying here? We've violated and gone against—the only thing that can actually bring us life and fulfill our purpose is: to live in complete harmony and *shalom* with our Creator. And so when we push God out of the scene—but we can't actually push God fully out of the scene. This overlap of heaven and earth still remains. In ancient Israel, this space was often “encounters” that people had with God's presence in the temple, right?—which, if you read the description of the temple, it's made to look like the Garden of Eden inside.

Or Jacob, he's, like, down by a stream in the river, and he puts his head down on a rock, and he has a dream and an encounter with the living God's presence right there on the spot. And he wakes up in the morning; he's like, “Holy cow, this is the place where heaven and earth overlap. And I didn't even know it”—right?—“And I went to sleep here ...”

So we can't *push* God out of his own creation, but he has given evil—and humans who give in to evil—some degree of autonomy, and our own will within his world to create hell. And so the storyline of the New Testament—and what Jesus is saying—is: This moment of this collision of heaven and earth, it's about to intensify. In fact, not only that, but God's kingdom is going to begin to invade more and more and more into the kingdom of this world.

And how do I know that's happening? Where is this taking place? Is it going to be, like, an army takeover or something? You're like, “What's it going to look like?” Jesus says, “Watch me.” And if you want to see what it looks like, read the Gospel of Mark. And that's what it looks like.

What does it look like when God takes back his kingdom over this world? It looks like prostitutes being forgiven. It looks like lepers and social outcasts being healed and restored to community. It looks like people who *no one* thought could ever be restored or have their sins forgiven—those people—they encounter this little—Jesus is like a little, walking, talking bit of new creation.

And people *encounter* the kingdom of God, the presence of the reality of God in Jesus, and they walk away in two ways, right? People—and just read the story of Mark this week—some people are humble; they know they need rescue. They know they need help, and they walk away from their encounter with Jesus completely changed, transformed, and healed.

And other people, who don't think they need to be rescued—they're utterly repelled by the same Jesus. They hate him because he exposes the darkness in their hearts. He exposes the fact that they actually like this setup, the way it is, right here. They want

God to stay on the margins, and “I want to call the shots.” And Jesus won't allow you that.

So he comes onto the scene, and he forces a decision. And that's essentially what he means when he says, “Repent and believe.” And so again, this is not abstract theology, you guys. This is the reality of Jesus' announcement of the kingdom that presses in on every single one of us. And the kingdom is not “a thing,” or it's not, like, “a place.” It's an event and an encounter that people have with King Jesus.

And people had it with him in the first century, for the years that he was cruising around. And then in his death, as he absorbs all of the pain and the sadness into himself. It's as if the cross becomes the “meeting place” of heaven and earth. The cross becomes the moment where Jesus is enthroned as king—and he gets the robe, and a crown, and a scepter, doesn't he?

What does it look like for God to take over the world? What does it look like when God becomes king? Well, it's entirely consistent with the Jesus you're going to read about this week in the story of Mark. It's the king who humbles himself, who offers grace and forgiveness, self-giving love, and it culminates—God becomes king by *taking* the pain and the sin of our tragic human world into himself on the cross. This is *euangelion*. Amen?

It's good news. This is how God becomes king. This is how God exercises his rule: self-giving love, so that those who humble themselves before their king can find grace and forgiveness, and a realignment of their lives into God's Kingdom.

And so the Kingdom of God is not, like, some institution or something. It's not the Church, because the Church is obviously a community of people who are just as broken as anybody else, just like Israel was. But the Church is a community of people who confess that the only place to realign ourselves, and our lives, with our divine purpose is to bow our knees to King Jesus; and to submit more and more of our lives, and to allow His grace, and the reality of who He is, to invade these dark corners of our lives; these unhappy spaces, and begin to erase them, so that more and more and more of our lives come under the control of His spirit, His personal presence.

This is what it looks like when the Kingdom of God takes over a human's life. It doesn't mean they're like “mindless zombies.” It actually means they're the most alive people you could ever imagine—because they're being freed. They're being freed from the darkness that's inside of them—is the idea. And they're being freed because of the power of how Jesus became a king—not with the sword, but by giving his life up to the sword. This is the *subversive* message of the Kingdom.

And so this is, obviously—it's very powerful, it's very personal. It's also corporate, because what happens when you get a critical mass of a community of people who are

experiencing more and more of the divine takeover of their lives? And what happens when they all tend to live in one community and in one place? Well then, that “kingdomness” is going to spill over into the rest of the community.

And it makes sense that if we're a community of people who are being taken over by the King, then we should begin to move towards precisely the people that Jesus moved towards. I mean, our prayer for revival is a prayer for a critical mass of churchgoers who actually meet Jesus, so—because if we can't meet Jesus, then how can we possibly introduce others to Jesus?

And so this revival is about praying for this “divine takeover” of *my* life and over the areas of my life where I've tried to push God out to the margins. And you know what that area is for you. You might have lots of them—I do. And it's surrendering to King Jesus, and seeking a real encounter with him, where I can walk away transformed.

This is not *religion*. This is a community of people who encounter it. Jesus said we are not the Kingdom, we are witnesses to the Kingdom—that's going to come in the book of Acts. A community of people who talk and share openly about our encounter with the living King Jesus, so that more—[Tim shows the audience an image] it looks like an eyeball now, doesn't it, in a strange way? [Laughing]—so, but you get the idea what I'm saying here: *more and more of our lives*.

And it, all of it—it's not religious duty—it's a *response* to the act of love that my king did for me. This is the Kingdom; it's individual, it's corporate, it changes everything. And the way Mark has presented this story to us is: this is the hinge-point of history. This is the history of all humanity, and every human story is wrapped up and answered in Jesus's proclamation of the Kingdom.

So I don't know what little dark crevice of your life—the little “sad face” in your life—where you shove God out, and where some of us need to yield to the king tonight. And if you do that, you may feel like you're losing your life, but Jesus said it's precisely by giving up your autonomy, and giving up your life—is the way to actually find life. And so some of us need to do that tonight.

There might be some of us here, and you've been kind of kicking the tires on the whole Jesus-thing long enough. And you need to humble yourself before your King. Not because he's a jerk and he wants to tell you what to do, but [with emotion] *because he loves you so dearly*. He wants to save you. He wants to transform you.

And there might be some of us here, and we would call ourselves “Christians,” and we haven't had an encounter—a Kingdom moment with Jesus that exposed what's inside of me, the darkness inside of me, and opens me up to his healing grace—we haven't had a moment like that in years. That moment is always available when we gather around

the Scriptures, around the bread and the cup, and around worship and prayer. And some of us need to come to Jesus tonight and remind ourselves that He's our King.

[Musical Break (49:52—50:06)]

You guys, thanks for listening to the *Exploring My Strange Bible* podcast. We'll continue on in this series for five more episodes, exploring major themes in New Testament theology, and we'll see you next time. Thanks for listening, you guys.

[Musical Finale (50:21—50:32)]