

October 10, 2010

# *Make Way for the King!*

Mark 1:1-8

## INTRODUCTION

Try to use your imagination and travel with me back in time and put yourself in the shoes of the first generation of Christians in Rome during the middle years of the first century. Rome, as you probably know, was the capital of the Roman Empire. The growing Jesus movement had been unpopular from the beginning, but a new emperor would elevate persecution to an art form. His name was Nero and his nickname across the Empire, even among loyal subjects, was “the Beast.” In the year 64 a fire broke out in the city that was initially blamed on Nero himself, but he had a scapegoat ready: the Christians. One method of torture devised was to line Christians on top of poles and light them on fire in order to give light to his garden. Needless to say, the church in Rome met underground for a while. But it was during the Neronian persecutions that Peter and Paul were both executed in Rome.

Into this trial of faith a new form of literature was born—a Gospel. It was more than simply a biography. Some of its features will frustrate us if all we’re looking for is just another biography of a great man. In all four Gospels (but especially this one) it is only the final three years of life that are written about. Clearly there are massive theological assumptions loaded into that choice. There has never been any serious question as to the author. John Mark—John being his Hebrew name, Markos his Greek—became the protégé of Peter in Rome (or “Babylon” as it was then known throughout the church) as evidenced by the close of Peter’s letter: “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son” [1 Pet. 5:13]. That combined with early Christian tradition give us good grounds to see this as Mark’s compilation of the preaching of Peter, probably finalized in around 65 AD.<sup>1</sup>

Verses 1-8 form a good text to introduce the Gospel as a whole. In it there are hints of a coming King. So use your imagination again. Pretend you know nothing about Jesus or the

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<sup>1</sup> A defense of this view may be found in my *Commentary on Mark*, pp. 1-5 for anyone who is interested.

people that have been waiting for him for ages. You are in Rome and your family has suddenly been swept up by this new religion. What is it? And who is this “king” that is being talked about in hushed tones underground? ‘*We have a king already—his name is Caesar!*’ So maybe you’re not buying it. Maybe you’re afraid for your sister or your father or your child and you want to talk them out of it, but you agree to read this new “biography” by this Markos: his Gospel about this Jesus who claims to be a king and demands that we follow him to our deaths. 1-8 gives us three key pieces to the puzzle of this King:

- THE KING’S MESSAGE INTO EXILE
- THE KING’S SURPRISING MESSENGER
- THE KING’S OTHER-WORLDLY WAY

**The Big Idea** is that the true King of glory ‘came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.’

## DOCTRINE

### I. THE KING’S MESSAGE INTO EXILE

#### A) The Gospel Was in the Beginning *and* Has a Beginning {v. 1a}

1. Compare this beginning to Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. Those are of the beginning of all things. This is of the beginning of the gospel. Have you ever thought about the relationship of those two “beginnings”? Of course Mark doesn’t mean that God was not revealing or accomplishing his gospel prior to this moment. He simply means that the fullness of time has come because God has shown up to all people groups as He said He would:

And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together [Is. 40:5].

2. What meaning would the first hearers have assumed of the word **gospel** (*euangelion*)? Some scholars think it is hard to say that it originally meant anything other than “news” or “message,” but other more perceptive scholars recognize in it the ancient practice of the messenger of war who would return to the city after the day’s battle. If he dragged his feet the news was bad; if he kicked his feet high up in full stride, then victory. Either way the feet were the visual key:

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news! [Rom. 10:15]

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says **to Zion**, “*Your God reigns.*” [Is. 52:7]

For Paul the ideal messenger of good news was the one who came to the *city of God* that was submerged in all the confusion and darkness and pain of the *city of man*, and brought back news from the real battle, to people who were oppressed by earthly powers, chased down by wild beasts in the coliseum, mocked, ridiculed, defeated in battle after battle: ‘Your King is on the throne right now and He has already won. It may not look like it. But the victory is yours right now in the middle of the darkness!’

B) The Gospel is *of* Jesus Christ, who *is* the Son of God {v. 1b}

1. So here we are doing a study of “the Gospel of Mark,” and it is easy to get lost in the details and forget that this is really the “gospel *of* Jesus Christ.” The good news is always *about* Jesus. So when we get down to this description of the messenger in verse 2, you should know that this prophecy is God the Father speaking to Christ: “I send my messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You” [NKJV].

2. Jesus is his name; Christ is his title. **Jesus** (*Iesous*) is *Jeshua* in Hebrew and it means “the Lord is salvation,” and Joseph was told by the angel Gabriel to name him this name because “he will save his people from their sins” [Mat. 1:21]: “Salvation belongs to the LORD” [Ps. 3:8]. Now **Christ** (*Christos*) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title *Messiah* which means the chosen or anointed one of God. So when the greatest military commander of Israel was called ‘Joshua’ he was only a type or shadow or symbol. The people could not enter the Promise Land under the man of Law (Moses), so they were led into the land by one whose name means “the Lord is salvation.” But at last that man and that land were only pointing forward to another day:

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his [Heb. 4:8-10].

3. Notice that Mark claims that Jesus is THE Son of God—not that He is ‘just another’ son of God. We will see things in this Gospel that seem at first glance to not go as far as John’s Gospel in claiming the deity of Christ. But we have to appreciate the meaning of this title. It is loaded with meaning just as much as the name “Jesus Christ” is. In the ancient world of monarchies, the royal line was divine. Their whole argument for legitimacy was that each

son had ultimately descended from the gods. So to say exclusively “Son of (THE) God” was nothing short of a claim to divinity. And if that doesn’t do anything for you, just read the citation of Isaiah 40:3-5 where the one John is speaking of is God himself (three times called YHWH in the prophecy). What is more, it was considered treason. Caesar was considered the only deity at the end of the day. You could worship whatever local pieces of rock and metal you wanted to, you could pray to the sun for your crops and thank your lucky stars for all your private jollies, but when the Roman legions rolled in on their chariots, everyone within earshot was commanded to bow down and shout “*Caesar kurios!*” (Caesar is Lord). But that was now unacceptable to these people.

C) The Gospel was Given *to* a People *for* Everyone’s Future {v. 2a}

1. Mark’s Gospel wasn’t written to the Jewish community like Matthew’s was. So it became necessary to explain customs and even interpret Aramaic words like *talitha cumi* [5:41], *Ephphatha* [7:34], *Abba* [14:36]. But this fact doesn’t mean that Mark would not appeal to the Jewish Scriptures. Verse 2 cites Isaiah 40:3 and then splices in Malachi 3:1—“*Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way...*” (2). There the prophecy is speaking *to* Jesus. Now if this introduction to our Savior is meant for non-Jewish ears, what is the value of bringing in the Jewish Scriptures? The answer is that Mark is building in an apologetic for the Christian worldview and gospel. He is treating his new Roman friends as reasonable people who will want answers to questions such as: a) If this Man is really the savior of the whole world why did He land in one particular time and place among one particular people—isn’t that narrow of God? But let’s say I have no argument against God being narrow: b) Why should I trust this Jewish message if the Jewish people do not even believe in Jesus? I hear they are the ones that handed him over to Pilate to be executed! These would be understandable questions and Mark anticipates them. Do you recognize such questions in our own time?

2. What would start to dawn on these Roman Christians in no time is that they had something in common with their Jewish brethren—they were both in **exile**. And in the Bible, exile is what happens when you’ve disobeyed God. When Adam disobeyed, he was exiled from Paradise. The sinful patriarchs were exiled in Egypt. When Israel disobeyed on the land of promise they became exiles in Babylon. And once they returned, they rejected the clearest revelation of God there would ever be: “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him” [Jn. 1:11]. Therefore they would be scattered one more time. Christians in Rome were driven out of their city, alienated from their families, hiding from

the authorities. They were fleeing from the pretend king, but they also knew that they were part of the rebel race of Adam. So this announcement of the real King came with a double-edged sword. They didn't know whether to celebrate or be afraid.

## II. THE SURPRISING MESSENGER

### A) John's Unusual Parade Route {v. 3a}

1. Apparently the same guys that forgot to give Jesus a book on church growth forgot to give John a book on political campaigns. He could have just marched into Jerusalem. It's not like there wasn't a ready following for a political savior who would throw off the yoke of their Romans oppressors. He didn't even pick a small town. He went for the wilderness and let the crowds come to him. But this is just what the prophecy foretold:

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain [Is. 40:3-4].

Now did you catch that rationale? Why the wilderness (or desert)? Because the Lord is going to flip the script on the old world in every way: "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" [1 Cor. 1:20]. For most people the wilderness is not an attractive place. It symbolizes desolation, a lack of resources and community. And it means the same thing to God's people too, but we know what the world doesn't, that "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" [Mat. 5:3]. The wilderness is the perfect place for God to get things started because out there his people are poor in spirit. So Jesus wanted his followers to make no mistake about what his gospel would be about—which wasn't always as obvious as you might think. Think of how his own brothers tried to advise him to do revolution the world's way:

So his brothers said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing. For no one works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world." For not even his brothers believed in him [Jn. 7:3-5].

2. John appeared {v. 4a}. This is typical of Mark's suddenness. Some people obsess over what John was doing out there in the wilderness all that time, but the Gospels never tell us how long he was out there. A better use of our imaginations—given the 'messenger-message' context—would be to compare this appearance to a drill sergeant waking the

company up before the crack of dawn with a trumpet blast in the ear and the following two commands:

B) John's Military Commands {v. 3b}

1. **Prepare a way** for the Lord means to prepare room in your heart, as evidenced by the substance of John's message—"proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (4). No one can be related to God in a good way if you have sins that are not dealt with. Next he says, **Make straight** or "Make way" (*hetoimazo*) here basically means "A-ten-hut!" When kings and queens (or even popes) would come through the street, messengers would go before him and announce his coming so that everyone would bow their faces to the ground until he was done riding through.

Now I will ask you to use your imagination one more time. Imagine if you were part of a people who were not only *not* in power, but you were in slavery or subjection or in hiding. You and your people have been conquered. You are lined up like cattle to be used like conquered people are used. And what if one of the slaves jumped up on the auction block and proclaimed 'Make Way for the King!' and pointed to one of the slaves!

2. Most people responded to John and went to him for this baptism {v. 5}. The key is that it was all 'of Judea and all Jerusalem' that went out to him and that they came 'confessing their sins' (5). God's own people needed to get right with him every bit as much as the dirty Gentiles! The sophisticated Roman citizens couldn't help thinking: This is no local, tribal deity!

C) John's Royal Clothes and Cuisine {v. 6}

1. He wore a covering of 'camel's hair' (6a) and he ate 'locusts and wild honey' (6b). The focus on John the Baptist is always about Christ. Mark is subtly suggesting that you can tell what kind of a King this is by what kind of a messenger He chose: "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, **humble** and mounted on a donkey" [Zech. 9:9]. First of all, this messenger was radically simple. He lived the kind of life you would live if you really believed that your whole purpose on earth was to say something about God. I don't think the point of John's lifestyle is to create some kind of superstitious renouncement of earthly things where we're afraid of food and money and friends and opportunities. But it *is* to create *some* kind of radical renouncement. We are not to be soft pillows for these things. Jesus would later challenge the people who once flocked to John:

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear **soft** clothing are in kings' houses [Mat. 11:7-8].

John wouldn't be *soft* toward earthly goods because he wasn't about to miss his chance to point everyone to the King. Second, the leather belt is no throw-away line either: "He (Elijah) wore a garment of hair, with a belt of leather about his waist" [2 Kings 1:8]. You remember that Elijah was supposed to be the forerunner of the Messiah? "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes" [Mal. 4:5, cf. Mk. 9:11-13]. Well here he is, complete with his camel's hair and leather belt! Elijah of old was a type and shadow.

But the main thing<sup>2</sup> Mark has in mind in this vivid description of the messenger is to show how the King himself has identified with the suffering of his people. John wore animal skins and it attracted religious buzzards. The Christians in the coliseum in Rome would be covered in animal skins and drenched in their blood so that the wild animals would become intoxicated with the scent and rip them to shreds. John wore what they wore. He would be a lamb led to his own slaughter. And so would the King that he announced. Jesus would not just be a servant King in talk and in empty gestures; He would be the suffering servant of his people. And what He would do to suffer for them was the only ultimate thing that any of them ever needed! They just had to look under the surface to see the glory of this King, since,

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not [Is. 53:2-3]

### III. THE KING'S OTHER-WORLDLY WAY

#### A) This is a Grave Warning and a Generous Offer {v. 7}

1. So let's connect the ideas of John's doctrine and John's application—"Make way for the King (or He's coming!)" and "Repent and be baptized (or Have your sins forgiven!)" and that second one is tougher because its shorthand. It just means, "Get ready to bring your sins to him and have them washed away"—the baptism is a symbol of that. So if we combine the whole thing another way, it may come across like this: "Quick everyone! Get ready! He's

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<sup>2</sup> cf. *Commentary on Mark* for justification of this ultimate significance over the material significance of fulfilled prophecy.

coming! Quick—repent! Confess! Get your sins ready!” It had that kind of force. I’m sure you’ve all seen the bumper sticker, trying to be funny, which says, “*Jesus is coming back—look busy!*” But that is the furthest thing from what John is saying. He is not suggesting: “Quick—*hide your sins!*” You can’t. The one who is coming sees deeper into your heart than you can: “And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” [Heb. 4:13]. Instead the messenger is saying, “Quickly, before it’s too late, present yourself, all of yourself, which is utterly sinful and rebellious and treason against this King, present it all to him!” which might not sound like a very attractive offer at first.

Something to remember for later on: John describes himself as “unworthy” to untie his King’s shoes. The reference is to the house servant who would stoop down and remove the shoes and wash the feet of guests in your home. In the rural life of first century Palestine, most people spent a good part of the day stepping in animal excrement. Often this ritual would involve cleaning the manure from between the toes. John thinks of that when he thinks of how far below Jesus he is. But there’s just one catch. This degrading ritual, Jesus the King performed for his disciples! Remember? Did you ever notice the words that give us a glimpse into Jesus’ motive just prior to getting up to perform this act?

*Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him [Jn. 13:1-5].*

So did you hear that? Jesus—knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands (like a King would to his prince who would inherit the throne), knowing this—he bowed down, face to the ground and wiped animal feces out from between the toes of traitors to his realm. Does that offend you? It did Peter at first.

2. And speaking of washing, the logic of Mark’s narrative takes us from John’s baptism to Jesus’ baptism: from the lesser to the greater {v. 8}. John’s baptism was correlated to forgiveness of sins somehow, but he expressly says: “*After me comes he who is mightier than I*” (7). And then he tells us clearly how the baptism to come will be superior: “*I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit*” (8), or, ‘I use water, He uses God!’ That’s a pretty big step up in means! Now the upshot of this is that this King who you have all offended with an infinite crime—this King is coming with the hopeful message of repentance and forgiveness of sin:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness [1 Jn. 1:9].

The offer in John's letter is the same as the offer from John the Baptist here. All who come to Christ confessing their sins and trusting Jesus to forgive their sins will have their sins forgiven. Now the messenger doesn't work out that entire message here, but I guarantee you that anyone who was troubled that day stuck around to hear more. So you should do the same throughout this series.

#### B) This is Too Good to be True but Too Offensive to Believe

1. The people who heard John the Baptist during the days of his ministry were not different than us. Some of them were reflective types seeking the meaning of life, others were the socially conscious types seeking to make the world a better place, others were riddled with anxieties over daily needs, and others just thought they already had all the answers and all the stuff they would ever need. And that is what people are like in their nature. You and I are like that today. So, at this point, Jews and Gentiles would both *naturally* have a reason to take offense at this King. After the way John opened up here, by now he should be giving us all battle plans and positions and answers. But instead he's talking about some little religious initiation ceremony called baptism and talking about how unworthy he is to be in with the King: "OK, OK—I get it, I'll go through this dunking and then maybe I'll get some answers...I'll jump through the hoop in the river and then he'll take me back into the armory to get suited up for battle, and I'll get a sword and we'll kick some Roman butt!"—but No. No matter what type of person you are, one thing I have always found to be true is that when we keep Jesus at an arm's length, it's because we think that there is something we're already doing that is just and worthy and innocent and harmless and due and we'll only listen to what Jesus has to say if He tells us how He's going to join *our* cause. In fact, we think that the messenger is there as a job applicant, or a representative of Jesus, who is applying for position in our hearts! The contemporary church has not helped here.

2. But let me be clear that Jesus is not just a King: He is King of everything. And He is *your* King. And you and I have betrayed him and committed treason against him and have cast our whole lot in with the rebel forces. John's message in the first century is still the message. The first part of the gospel message that you need to hear in every generation is that *you* are the problem. The first thing that needs to be dealt with when the King comes to town is our treason. So Jesus didn't come to give you a solution to something you were already looking for. He came to force you to a conclusion in your armed resistance against him. And that can

only end one of two ways for each rebel: Either in surrender and damnation. Either way, conquest:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him [Ps. 2:10-12].

Either way, Jesus conquers every single rebel. He will either conquer each rebel in hell or He will conquer them by his cross, where He takes the traitor's punishment for them. But I don't need to argue all that today. We will see throughout this Gospel of Mark how important that work of the servant King is. No matter who you are, this message is for *you*.

**Repeat the Big Idea** is that the true King of glory 'came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

## APPLICATION

**To the Skeptic** – Christianity is not the story of how God has tried desperately to answer your questions. God is not in the dock, you are. You are not on the throne, He is. Jesus doesn't need numbers or natural talents. When God sent his Son into this world, He sent him into a world that was doing everything wrong—the same world *you* live in, where there are no solutions and nothing that lasts. The same problems that human beings had in the first century, we have in the twenty-first century. We may think that we have come of age and know more things, but the basic problems remain: What happens to me when I die? Why do I feel anxiety and guilt? What does God want from me? What would I say to God if He were to send his Son back right now? Now these are better questions to ask when you realize that you're not up against an abstract 'answerer' (like you are in Eastern religion) whose only job is to satisfy your private pursuit of nirvana.

**To the Saint** – It is possible for the true Christian to take offense at Jesus for a season. Anyone who would follow Jesus must follow him in his way, but Jesus already led by example. Throughout this Gospel, Mark's frequent use of the word *eutous* (ευθους), which means "immediately" or "straightaway," connects each scene, giving a fast-paced sense of Jesus just passing through only in order to get to the cross for which He came. I know there's a lot of people in the church today talking about "mission" and "serving" who always put humble mission against doctrine and doing things right. But don't through the baby out with the bathwater. Take a season to see what it was like for Jesus to

be on mission, being the God who serves. And ask yourself if you are offended by the humility and dirtiness and lowliness and patience of God.

**To the Sinner** – Perhaps you will say, “This text doesn’t say anything about me being a traitor. I’m even a churchgoer!” But John doesn’t say, “Now *some* of you are going to have to prepare a place for the King! *Some* of you will have to repent of your treason!” He says categorically to everyone—Make way for the King! And how do we do that? We simply come to him as sorry traitors and empty beggars and ask him for forgiveness and to trust Him when He says that He “justifies the ungodly” [Rom. 4:5], and that “while we were enemies of God” [Rom. 5:10] He died for us.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus came the first time in humility to announce his wrath and his patience, his justice and his mercy and to put away sin for some; but when He comes the second time it will be in full exaltation and there will be no more chance to make way for the King.

I will close with the words of C. S. Lewis, where he described the difference between the King’s first coming and second coming this way:

Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise...Why is God landing in this enemy-occupied world in disguise and starting a sort of secret society to undermine the devil? Why is he not landing in force, invading it?...God will invade. But I wonder whether people who ask God to interfere openly and directly in our world quite realize what it will be like when He does. When that happens, it is the end of the world. When the author walks onto the stage the play is over. God is going to invade alright: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else—something it never entered your head to conceive—comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing: it will be the time that we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side...It will not last forever. We must take it or leave it.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Simon & Schuster, New York 1996); pp. 51, 65-66