

Unexpected Beginnings

August 9, 2020



Daily Devotionals Introduction

As you read about Jesus in the Gospels, you might see some things that perhaps you weren't expecting. For this 13-week series, we'll open the Book of Mark together and study the life of Jesus—The Unexpected King. During this series, we will gain a better understanding of who Jesus is and what it really means to be his disciple.

As an individual or as a family, use these daily devotionals and reflection questions to connect with Jesus each day this week.

Each day, there will be a thought stemming from our Scripture passage along with 2-3 questions. Our hope is that as we journey together through the book of Mark, we'll be able to come out the other side knowing more about the life of Jesus.

Be sure to prayerfully consider each day's truth, passages, and each of the questions. If you are a part of a life group, let these devotionals stir your thinking and be the foundation for your group conversation.

Our prayer is that these devotionals, questions, and reflections will help you love God, love people, and make disciples.

Day 1

When ESPN launched the documentary, “The Last Dance,” we were all quickly reminded of why Michael Jordan is considered one of the best basketball players of all time. For the Bulls and for the NBA, there was a clear difference between basketball *before* Michael and basketball *after* Michael. When Michael Jordan came into the league, everything changed.

Before Michael, the Bulls franchise was valued at \$18.7 million, the Bulls only made the playoffs twice from 1975-1984, and the Bulls hadn’t ever won any titles.

After Michael, the Bulls franchise went from a valuation of \$18.7 million to over \$3 billion, according to the *Chicago Tribune*; the Bulls went to the playoffs every year he played for them; and the Bulls won six titles in eight years.

Michael entered the league. Everything was different.

There’s not much that happens on a day-to-day basis that we would consider as disruptive to our lives as Michael’s entrance into professional basketball was for the NBA. But Mark, from the very beginning of his gospel, is making the case that something even more earth-shattering happened in Israel over 2,000 years ago – the coming of Jesus.

Scholar James R. Edwards writes, “For Mark the introduction of Jesus is no less momentous than the creation of the world, for in Jesus a new creation is at hand.”

“No less momentous than the *creation* of the world??” That’d a bold statement, isn’t it?

It is. But that’s Mark’s point. Look at how he compares the reality of Jesus’ coming to God creating the cosmos by tipping his hat to **Genesis 1:1**.

Genesis: “In the *beginning*, God created the heavens and the earth” (**Genesis 1:1**).

Mark: “The *beginning* of the good news of King Jesus, the Son of God” (**Mark 1:1**).

While Genesis may deal with light, land, and life bursting forth from the mouth of God at the dawn of creation, Mark deals with King Jesus bursting onto the scene as both preacher and gardener of a *new creation*.

What's important for us to reflect on is that Jesus' coming isn't just something we either affirm or deny, or shove into the junk drawer of our lives to be brought out at a later time when needed. Jesus was a real human, at a real time, and in a real place. He died a real death. He was raised from the dead. And he is King of the Universe.

That is reality. No ifs, ands, or buts.

For Mark, if your answer to the question of Jesus' identity aligns with his, that should lead to a disruption of volcanic proportions in your heart and in how you lead your life. But that's not always the case for Christians in America. We have to be really intentional or else we can drift randomly on logs of comfort, ease, stability, affluence, and material possessions.

Because drifting is so easy, we have to ask a couple of questions:

1. Who is Jesus to you?
2. Take time to really reflect on the following: How has your answer to that first question worked its way down into the way you operate emotionally, relationally, financially, vocationally? How has your answer to that question seeped into your character? Into your decision making processes? Into your personality?
3. Write a prayer to God expressing your thoughts, feelings, concerns, worries, hopes, and dreams about how you responded to questions 1 and 2.

Day 2

When Mark begins his gospel account, we stumble into a story where we find the people of God still in exile – at least metaphorically. The Israelites may not physically be in exile any longer, but they are still under Gentile rule. God’s people are in a state of hopelessness, confusion, and need. *Where is God? Why has he not fulfilled his promises? When will he come to bring salvation?*

I’m not sure about you, but for me that sentiment feels weirdly close to how *today* feels in the midst of COVID-19, a looming election, an economic downturn, racial tensions, global unrest, and so on and so on. We find ourselves asking the same kinds of questions: *Where is God? Why has he not come through? When is he going to mop up all this mess?*

If you think about it, these kinds of questions are nothing new for God’s people. The prophet Isaiah cried out to God with a similar sentiment many years ago when he mournfully asked God to “**Rend [tear open] the heavens and come down...**” (**Isaiah 64:1**). Why this urgent cry for God to come? As theologian Richard B. Hays writes,

The prophet looks around and sees a people with hardened hearts, who stray from the Lord’s ways (**63:17**). He sees the holy city of Jerusalem trampled down by foreign powers (**63:18**). Despite memories of God’s glorious deliverance for Israel in the past (**63:7-14**), it seems as though God no longer rules (**63:19**). God seems to have withdrawn and sealed up the heavens, hiding his face from his people (**64:7**). In this time of need, Isaiah cries out to God to remember his love for Israel and to act, to break open the silent heavens and manifest his saving power once more (*Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, pg. 17).

It is then in Mark’s gospel account that we find his answer to Isaiah’s plea all those years ago. For Mark, in Jesus, the heavens are finally “torn open” (**Mark 1:10**). Seeds of hope have sprung up from the ground. The night is gone and a new day has dawned. God has come – although not in a way anyone thought he would come. And to be honest, that new day hasn’t been fully *realized* yet.

When someone interviews for a job and they get verbal confirmation that the job is theirs, there is a sense in which that job isn’t realized until they actually sign the paperwork. The same is true with Jesus and his kingdom. Jesus is King. No doubt about that. His reign just hasn’t fully come to fruition quite yet.

That’s a hard reality to come to grips with. We are always living in between Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. Life is always Holy Saturday – a time of being “in-between.” As one Jewish rabbi put it, “Followers of God are not in Egypt, but nor are they quite yet in the Promised Land. Life is learning to live in the wilderness.”

With that being the case, here are a few questions to consider:

1. Imagine yourself having a conversation with God. What questions would you ask him about the state of our world? How do you feel he would respond?
2. In what ways do you currently feel the tension of living “in-between” the reality that Jesus is king over everything and the reality that his kingdom has not been fully realized yet?
3. Which aspects of Isaiah’s cry in the passage above most resonate with you? What truths about God do you need to focus on to help you live as a better disciple in this season of unknowns?

Day 3

I had a conversation with some older Christians who go to our church in which the topic of electricity came up. We talked about how electricity has changed so much in our world. In the midst of that conversation, a couple of people noted that they actually remembered when they first got electricity in their homes (I know...crazy, right??).

Of course, I was immediately intrigued, so I began asking questions about what that experience was like. They vividly described how the electric company in their area finally brought power lines out to their farms and homes, and how they were able to utilize the benefits of electricity in their everyday lives. They remembered how the fundamental aspects of life were instantly affected – the ways they experienced daylight and dark, hot and cold, clean and dirty, work and leisure, preparing food and preserving it were all changed drastically, and for the better.

As Dallas Willard notes about the introduction of electricity in his childhood home, what people heard from the electric companies was the announcement, “Change your life, electricity is here! Put away your kerosene lamps, turn from your iceboxes and cellars, your scrub boards and rug-beaters, your manual sewing machines, and your radio with dry-cell batteries! A new way of living has opened up!” Electricity is something we now take for granted. For those folks who still remember an earlier time, it changed everything! BUT, they had to believe in this new power and make the proper adjustments in their lives to rely on and utilize it to its fullest capability.

I think this shift in thinking gets at the heart of what is happening when Jesus says, in essence, “Change your life, for the kingdom of God is here” (**Mark 1:14-15**). Jesus is saying that a new way of living has opened up. God’s rule and God’s reign is here. It’s tangible. Adjust your life practically to rely on it.

We all may have grown up thinking all kinds of different things about the gospel. Let’s break down what Jesus himself is saying the gospel is. The word “gospel” means “good news.” It isn’t just good advice, in the sense that someone can take it or leave it if they so desire. No, news is the proclamation that something has *happened*, and as a result, everything is different.

We notice that Jesus speaks with a tone of certainty. For him, the reality of this good news is not something one can argue against. Similarly, when Americans elect the president every four years, there is no denying the news of who is voted in. It’s a reality. You can’t deny it. All you can do is choose to either align your life with it or not. In the same way, the good news of God’s rule and reign breaking into the world is a reality, whatever we may think about it. When Jesus uses the word “repent,” he’s calling us to align with the reality of God’s authority.

Here are some questions to reflect on:

1. When you think about what the gospel is, how does your definition compare with what you see Jesus describing here in **Mark 1:14-15**? Where does your definition align with his? Where does it not align?
2. What feelings do you have about the *reality* of Jesus' coming and proclaiming the rule and reign of God? On a scale of 1-10, what is your level of certainty about the reality of Jesus and his kingdom?
3. Where might there still be areas in your life where you need to "repent" and align your life more fully with Jesus' kingdom? What has kept you from already doing so?

Day 4

Yesterday we looked at Jesus' proclamation of the gospel – the good news of God's rule and reign. We saw how much of a reality that was for Jesus himself. Today and tomorrow, we are going to look at two ways that message manifested itself in the world of Jesus' day.

The first way comes in **Mark 1:16-20**. In these verses, we see that God's rule and reign leads to **discipleship**.

Read the passage below about Jesus calling the disciples and circle or note any part that resonates or stands out to you:

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." At once they left their nets and followed him.

When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

When we think of the name "Christian," we often think of someone who just professes faith in Jesus, attends church, maybe is in a small group, tithes, etc. But when Jesus calls Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow him, he is calling them to be his *disciples*.

That word can be confusing, but in simple terms a disciple is a "student" or an "apprentice" of Jesus. I like how Rowan Williams talks about what being a disciple was in Jesus' day. He says,

What makes you a disciple is not turning up from time to time. Discipleship may literally mean "being a student," in the strict Greek sense of the word, but it doesn't mean turning up once a week for a course (or even a sermon). It's not an intermittent state; it's a relationship that continues. The truth is that, in the ancient world, being a "student" was rather more like that than it is these days. If you said to a modern prospective student that the essence of being a student was to hang on your teacher's every word, to follow in his or her steps, to sleep outside their door in order not to miss any pearls of wisdom falling from their lips, to watch how they conduct themselves at the table, how they conduct themselves in the street, you might not get a very warm response. But in the ancient world, it was rather more like that. To be the student of a teacher was to commit yourself to living in the same atmosphere and breathing the same air; there was nothing intermittent about it.

We're really good at claiming Jesus as our Savior, and we may confess Jesus as Lord, but here's a question for you to consider: Is Jesus your Teacher? And I don't just mean "head knowledge"— memorizing Scriptures, information about God, or factoids of theology.

Jesus is the mind of God on display in human flesh. Jesus shows us what God's vision for being human looks like. Do you come to him to apprentice under him? Are you Jesus' student? Do you come to him just for your ticket into the pearly gates *only*, or to learn what a life lived under God's rule and reign really, actually looks like?

Here are some questions to help you reflect on that:

1. What is something you have learned from Jesus recently? (This may be a good indicator of whether Jesus is your teacher!) How have you allowed that teaching to influence the way you lead your life?
2. What words did you underline or circle in the Mark passage above? What do you think the Lord is inviting you into by pointing out those words or phrases?
3. How might your spiritual life improve if you fully embraced discipleship to Jesus? How might it be negatively impacted if you denied discipleship to Jesus?

Day 5

For our last day of devotionals this week, we are going to look at the second manifestation of God's kingdom breaking into the world: **renewal**.

Yesterday we looked at how Jesus' proclamation of the gospel – the good news of God's rule and reign – manifests itself in following Jesus as our Teacher. But the reality of God's kingdom isn't just something that comes about for us on a personal level.

The good news of God's kingdom actually has a scope that goes beyond individual hearts – it is for all of creation (see **Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20; Romans 8:21-22**). And we see that scope at play in Mark's gospel as Jesus heals the sick and exorcises demons.

Take a few moments and read the following passages. As you do so, note the connection between the kingdom of God and the renewal that these folks receive in their lives:

- **Mark 1:21-28**
- **Mark 1:29-39**
- **Mark 1:40-45**

I love these passages because they show us what life looks like when God has his way with things. Healing? Justice? Restoration? Redemption? Renewal? Count me in!

Hopefully, this week has helped you spend time thinking about some of the fundamentals of what it means to be a Christian. We have looked at Jesus, the kingdom, discipleship, and the gospel. And the journey is just getting started.

Let's wrap up this week with a story to illustrate why Mark might have launched his gospel by reminding us of these things:

On December 26, 1960, Vince Lombardi and his Green Bay Packers stood in defeat as the Philadelphia Eagles beat them 17-13 – a game in which Green Bay was favored to win. A couple of months after that crushing

defeat, Lombardi stood in front of his men as they prepared to embark on the 1961 football season – men who, months earlier, had seen championship dreams slip through their fingers.

What do you say to a group of men who had laid it all on the line only to come up 4 points short – what words can get them ready to play a whole new season? Lombardi started training camp holding something in his hand that needed no explanation.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “This is a football.”

With those five words, Lombardi made his point loud and clear. If you want to win a championship, you’ve got to know and execute the fundamentals. Six months later, the same group of men gathered together to hear another one of Vince Lombardi’s speeches. This time it was to celebrate their NFL Championship and their 37–0 victory over the NY Giants. By remembering the fundamentals, they had become the best in the league at the tasks everyone else took for granted.

The reality of Jesus, the kingdom of God, gospel, and discipleship are as fundamental to Christian living as the actual football is to the game of football. And I think that’s what Mark is wanting us to know.

As you think about what that means for your own life, here are some questions to help you along the way:

1. Where in your life have you contributed to chaos instead of renewal because you were not living fully surrendered to Jesus and his kingdom? When was a time you experienced renewal and restoration by fully surrendering to Jesus and his kingdom?
2. If you could bring about God’s kingdom of renewal, restoration, and justice in three places in our world today, what three places would you choose? Why?
3. As a result of your reflections over the course of this week, what do you feel God is inviting you to do or to change in your life?