

Mark 1:9-15 ⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." ¹² At once the Spirit sent him out into the desert, ¹³ and he was in the desert forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. ¹⁴ After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. ¹⁵ "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"

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Jesus' ministry was to walk about the small towns of Galilee announcing, "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." When Jesus announced the kingdom of God as near the intent of this in the Greek language was to say that it is here. This long expected time in history of God's present and visible reign had begun. For Jesus, proclaiming the kingdom of God, the reign of God in word and act was what he was here to do. It was the central focus of his ministry.

One question that has struck me in the past few years is: "What has happened to the Kingdom of God?" For the most part we seemed to have relegated it to being simply a future event and to be quite the biblical scholar it seems there is a trajectory in the New Testament that shifts the Kingdom from being a present reality in the body of Christ by means of the presence of the Holy Spirit with us to simply being a future hope. Talk of it seems to have disappeared after the first few generations of the church. It's not mentioned at all in the Apostles' Creed which is the church's earliest confession of faith. Then, if you do a little historical research you find that the next time it comes to the fore was in the crusades where Christian kings used war to try to establish it. After that the next time it shows up is with missions movements in the 1800's which sought to establish the kingdom by globally promoting "civilization". Human attempts to establish the kingdom of God have always failed miserably. Nevertheless, Jesus came proclaiming the good news that the kingdom of God is near, at hand; with us and not simply a future hope. So where is it? What is it? How is it near?

Well, to speak of the kingdom of God is to speak of God's reign through grace. It goes beyond God's sovereignty over all creation where we say God reigns over everything. If you will allow me to do some quantum leaping for the sake of brevity, when we say kingdom of God we mean the extent of the influence of God's grace not just his authority. The kingdom of God is the extent that in our time and in our space God's grace is the defining power over against the tyranny of sin and death.

I guess we once again need to hear what God's grace is. It is not courtroom leniency where God just forgives humanity's sin on account of Jesus' death, resurrection and continual intercession on our behalf. The biblical understanding of God's grace derives from the royal court and the idea of having a monarch's favour. God's grace is that we have been brought into God's presence in response to his summoning us to come to him and there he extends his favour towards us and promises to act on our behalf. Paul in Romans speaks of grace

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as being a place in which we stand. He writes: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:1-2). Paul speaks of grace as being the reality in which we stand where the power of God’s grace is the authority under which we conduct our lives. We need be no longer slaves to sin and the fear of death.

So, the Kingdom of God, God’s reigning over us according to grace is near. It is here, at hand ruling over us. That should lead us to ask how do we know it’s here? What should be our experience of it? We don’t typically see miraculous healings or demons cast out, though I know people for which both have happened. Just to make a summary statement that, Jesus didn’t heal and cast out demons for the sake of doing them. They were physical signs of the kingdom’s presence and the end result of them was to restore people to being able to function with dignity within human community. That provides us with a rule of thumb when it comes to the kingdom of God and the way God’s grace works. It doesn’t dehumanize like sin and death do. It re-humanizes people, restores us to dignity.

But back to the questions I was just asking about experiencing the kingdom of God, indeed, experiencing God’s reign of grace in our lives. In our passage from Mark we see four ways of experiencing the kingdom: personal knowledge of being a beloved child of God; being driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness; being tempted by Satan; and repentance and faith. It would be easy to write a sermon on each of these experiences, but let’s take a brief look at them each.

When Jesus came up out of the water from being baptized the heavens were torn open so that we can see in and we see the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove and then hear the voice of the Father from the heavens saying, “You are my beloved Son, I take great delight in you.” Personally knowing oneself to be a child of God whom he loves and takes great delight in is the direct result of having experienced Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul speaks of this on several occasions: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (Rom. 8:14). “It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:16-17a). “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal. 3:26). And here’s the clincher, “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Gal. 4:4-7). As we are God’s children in Christ Jesus the Holy Spirit moves in us to make us to know the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Father.

Another way we experience God’s grace is being driven by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness. The Holy Spirit will lead us to and through difficult, barren, and dry times in our lives where the main point of it all is that we are learning to be dependent on God’s love and faithfulness alone. It’s a time in our lives where we find ourselves confronted with our idols, those things or people in our lives

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that we love and trust in the way we should love and trust God. In the wilderness the Holy Spirit helps free us from those things we have let have an inordinate power over us.

In the wilderness, we will also find ourselves tempted by Satan. We need to be careful not to diminish the sort of temptation to things like, “I’m trying to quit smoking and I just finished this unbelievably outstanding steak and the cigarette over their smoldering on the curb is really tempting me.” That’s not the kind of temptation Satan confronts us with. He tries to get us to take our identity as children of God and the gifts for ministry that God has given us for building up the church and use them for ourselves, for our own purposes. Unlike the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t describe how Jesus was tempted. But, Luke and Matthew tell us Satan tempted Jesus to use his authority and power of being God the Son to serve himself. First, Jesus was hungry having fasted 40 days. Satan tempted, “If you are the one through whom all things were created turn that stone to bread and feed yourself.” Satan also tried to get Jesus to prove his identity by telling him to go jump off the temple because it is written that the angels won’t let him fall. Then Satan tempted him with respect to his Lordship over the creation saying he would give Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth if Jesus would just worship him. Jesus used Scripture to resist Satan and his temptations. So it is with us. We need to know the Scriptures otherwise we just wind up ignorant of the Lord’s will and serving ourselves or some false form of religion.

Finally, we come to a famous phrase, “Repent and believe.” This phrase should be taken as a whole and not broken into two separate thoughts. For example, we say “jump and shout” to capture the idea of celebrating likewise “pizza and beer” when we mean football, basketball, soccer, or hockey. Repentance and faith go together as two sides of the same coin. Faith isn’t simply a matter of believing something. It is living according to one’s trust in God. Therefore, faith is not faith unless it shows up as living a life of repentance, of turning away from our idols and the temptations to serve ourselves and turning towards God and living under the authority of his grace. The New Testament Greek word for repentance actually means to become “with minded”. It is to be minded towards the things that Jesus was minded towards particularly lives lived to enjoy and please God. This is a difficult thing to do, but keep this in mind: we are talking about grace here. In the end, come Judgment Day, it is Jesus, not ourselves, who will present us perfect before the Father. Jesus will boast of his gracious work in us. We will boast of his work as well not our own.

Finally, to speak of the kingdom is to speak of God’s gracious work in us to perfect us in his own image. Jesus by the Holy Spirit’s applying God’s grace to us will make us to be who he wants us to be, therefore we just keep ourselves minded towards him in prayer and our minds filled with meditation on the scriptures. The result is that we can look forward to a daily journey of discovering the steadfast love and faithfulness of God towards us. Amen.