

THE  
VICTORY  
ACCORDING  
TO MARK

AN EXPOSITION OF THE SECOND GOSPEL

BY MARK HORNE

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While my debts to many for the content of this book are mentioned in the epilogue, I would like to dedicate this book first to my wife Jennifer and to my children, who all sacrificed a great deal of time for me to get this done and offered encouragement. Without them there would be no book.

I would also like to include in this dedication Jim and Janey Irwin and all the saints who met in our weekly Bible study at their house in Renton, WA, where I first began to develop this material.

MARK HORNE





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Mark 1:1–15

## The Call

*He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou Me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.*

—Albert Schweitzer

**M**ark's beginning is characteristically succinct. "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The danger here is that we are so accustomed to speaking of and reading about a "gospel," or even "the gospel" and also "the Son of God," that we don't bother to think about what these terms meant in their original context.

### WHAT IS THE GOSPEL? (1:1)

Let's take the term "gospel" first: What does it *mean*? We kick the word around a lot in evangelical circles. It is derived from the Old English word *godspell* and is used to translate the Greek term, *evangelion*. The best transliteration of the term is "good news" or "joyful message." However, we might have a better understanding if we consider some prominent ways in which the word was used at the time of Jesus.

## THE PAGAN CONTEXT

Consider this inscription from 9 B.C.:

The providence which has ordered the whole of our life, showing concern and zeal, has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a deliverer for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere . . . ; the birthday of the god [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the *glad tidings* that have come to men through him.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have the announcement of the birthday of Augustus Caesar dubbed as a gospel—“glad tidings” or *good news*. As Biblical and historical scholar N. T. Wright sums up the evidence, “In the Greek world, as is well known among scholars, *evangelion* is a regular technical term, referring to the announcement of a great victory, or to the birth, or accession, of an emperor.”<sup>2</sup>

The point here is that a “gospel” refers to a *public announcement of victory*.

## THE JEWISH BACKGROUND

Wright also points out two passages from Isaiah which bear on the original meaning of the word “gospel.” The first is Isaiah 40:9 (I include verse ten for context).

Get yourself up on a high mountain,  
O Zion, bearer of *good news*.  
Lift up your voice mightily,  
O Jerusalem, bearer of *good news*;  
Lift it up, do not fear.  
Say to the cities of Judah,  
“Here is your God!”  
Behold, the Lord God will come with might,  
With His arm *ruling* for Him.

<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 43. A slightly different reading of the same inscription is found in John Dominic Crossan’s *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



Behold, His reward is with Him,  
And His recompense before Him. (emphasis added)

In the common Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, the word for “good news” is *evangelion*. The same is true of Isaiah 52:7.

How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings *good news*,  
Who announces peace  
And brings *good news* of happiness,  
Who announces deliverance,  
And says to Zion, “Your God is King!” (emphasis added)

These texts are about a return from exile for God’s people when their land will be returned to them and God will again dwell in their midst on Zion in Jerusalem in the Temple. It is important to remember that the Temple was God’s palace. In fact, the same Hebrew word is used throughout the narrative of 1 Kings and 1 Chronicles to describe the construction of both God’s “Temple” and King Solomon’s “palace.” Both structures are given the same name because they are both royal houses wherein a king is enthroned. At the time of the exile, God abandoned his palace and allowed Nebuchadnezzar to destroy it. Instead of ruling from there, He came on his throne and dwelt with the exiles in Babylon, as revealed in Ezekiel 1.

Thus, prophesying the return from exile when God’s presence will again be in Jerusalem is an announcement of his enthronement. It fits in quite well with the pagan use of the term in the first century. Both Jew and Gentile alike use the term to refer to the victory or ascension of a king—perhaps the triumphant beginning of his rule. For the Jews this meant the one true God who had chosen a people and chosen to dwell enthroned among them at the Temple in Jerusalem. For the pagans it meant some *other* god had begun to rule as king—often these false gods were mighty men like Caesar who claimed to be divine.

#### THE CHRISTIAN PROCLAMATION

What is the upshot of all this? Quite simply, while the gospel *does* result in changed lives and forgiven individuals, the gospel message

is *not* simply a method for changing one's life or receiving forgiveness. In other words, the gospel is not a description of how one goes about getting "a personal relationship" with God. When a new king has conquered and, as a result, ascends to his throne to rule, the news causes his enemies to tremble in fear. It causes those who want to benefit from his rule to bow their knees in submission to his authority. That is the kind of news the gospel is. That is what Mark is writing about—the conquest and triumph of a new king.

#### THE MEANING OF CHRIST

In our culture today I suspect many people probably think that "Christ" was simply Jesus' last name. That is quite wrong, of course. Christ comes from the Greek word for "anointed." It is the equivalent of the Hebrew term for "Messiah"—God's promised king.

Again, this is a *royal* title. While other officials in Israel's society were anointed with oil in order to call them into office, the anointing of kings gained special prominence. Samuel anointed Saul with oil to set him apart for the kingship of Israel (1 Sam. 10:1). David was then anointed by Samuel when God decided to take the kingdom from Saul and give it to him. It is important to note that this anointing was not precisely the same thing as a coronation ceremony, since neither Saul nor David was able to assume the throne immediately after he was anointed. Nevertheless, it was considered the starting point in the calling of the king and the basis of his rule. Thus, Psalm 89:20 stresses, "I have found David My servant; with My holy oil I have anointed him." And in Psalm 2:2, David or a Davidic king is referred to as the Lord's "anointed." When Samuel tells Saul, "the Lord anointed you king over Israel," he is saying that God has *made him king* of Israel. Anointing is the essential element in giving Saul his identity as one called to be king.

Thus, if you want to explain what the term "Jesus Christ" means, perhaps a good paraphrase would be "King Jesus." That would certainly be a good way to begin such an explanation. The word "Christ" is a term for his royal status as a descendant of David.

## SON OF GOD

The term “son of God” fits well within this royal language. God had promised David,

When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took *it* away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever. (2 Sam. 7:12–16)

From that time on, and perhaps even before, being God’s “son” was a royal title. All Israel was called God’s son (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). It was appropriate that the king, as the representative of his people, should also bear that same title for himself. Thus, while Psalm 2 ultimately points to Jesus and His resurrection (Acts 13:33), it also describes David and his dynasty to the initial readers and hearers: “Surely I will tell of the decree of the LORD: You are my son; today I have begotten you.” Likewise, we read in Psalm 89:20–27,

I have found David My servant;  
 With My holy oil I have anointed him,  
 With whom My hand will be established;  
 My arm also will strengthen him.  
 The enemy will not deceive him,  
 Nor the son of wickedness afflict him.  
 But I shall crush his adversaries before him,  
 And strike those who hate him.  
 And My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him,  
 And in My name his horn will be exalted.  
 I shall also set his hand on the sea,  
 And his right hand on the rivers.  
 He will cry to Me, “*You are my Father,*  
*My God, and the rock of my salvation.*”  
 I also shall make him *first-born*,  
 The highest of the kings of the earth. (emphasis added)

To be the Son of God is to be Israel's king. Thus, in John's Gospel we see the two titles put side by side: "Nathanael answered Him, 'Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel'" (Jn. 1:49). Mark's Gospel gives us the same idea. There are some manuscripts which are missing the reference to "son of God," but whatever the original reading of Mark, the idea is still quite present: *This is the story of the victory of Jesus, the king of Israel.*

#### THE BEGINNING

Since we have analyzed every other word in Mark's short introduction, perhaps we should consider if there is anything to be said about the first one: "the beginning." Given the overtones of royalty that we have already dealt with, it may be profitable if there is a royal Davidic connection with Mark's use of this term.

Jeff Meyers, in his 1997 lectures on Mark's Gospel, suggests that there is such a connection. Bearing in mind that Mark is about to quote a prophecy of making "ready the way of the Lord" and "making his paths straight," we may have here a suggestion of Solomon's wisdom: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Prov. 1:7a).

What follows in Proverbs is a sustained exhortation to avoid evil company. "My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet from their path" (1:15). Rather, the "son" should

walk in the way of good men,  
And keep to the paths of the righteous.

For the upright will live in the land,  
And the blameless will remain in it;  
But the wicked will be cut off from the land,  
And the treacherous will be uprooted from it. (2:20–22)

Later Solomon sums up the need for a choice of the right way:

The *beginning* of wisdom is: Acquire wisdom;  
And with all your acquiring, get understanding.  
Prize her, and she will exalt you;  
She will honor you if you embrace her.  
She will place on your head a garland of grace;  
She will present you with a crown of beauty.

Hear, my *son*, and accept my sayings,  
 And the years of your life will be many.  
 I have directed you in the *way* of wisdom;  
 I have led you in upright *paths*.  
 When you walk, your steps will not be impeded;  
 And if you run, you will not stumble.  
 Take hold of instruction; do not let go.  
 Guard her, for she is your life.  
 Do not enter the *path* of the wicked,  
 And do not proceed in the *way* of evil men. (4:7–14; emphasis added)

As we follow the way of the Lord through Mark, we will find the basic choice of which way to go to be presented rather strikingly, especially in irony and parable and in other ways which remind us of royal wisdom.

#### THE PROPHECIES (1:2,3)

When Paul preached to the Pisidian Antiochians, he summed up his message by announcing the gospel and then quoting prophecies of the gospel.

And we preach to you the good news [gospel] of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this promise to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, “You are My Son; today I have begotten you.” (Acts 13:32, 33)

Likewise, the beginning of Paul’s letter to the Romans follows that same form, first mentioning the gospel and then the prophecies: “Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures.” The author of Hebrews, also, first announces the identity of Jesus as God’s Son and promised one (vv. 1–4) and then begins quoting Scriptural prophecies (vv. 5ff.).

By announcing a gospel and then backing it up with Hebrew prophecies, Mark seems to be following the Apostolic presentation quite closely.

The beginning of the joyful proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“Behold, I send My proclaimer before Your face,  
Who will prepare Your way;  
The voice of one crying in the wilderness,  
‘Make ready the way of the Lord,  
Make His paths straight.’”<sup>3</sup>

This may seem like a rather straightforward prophecy, but it is actually not. What Mark has done is quote a verse from Isaiah with an introductory verse from Malachi. The angel or messenger sent to prepare the way comes from Malachi 3:1. The voice in the wilderness is found in Isaiah 40:3.

But things are even more complicated. Mark does not quote Malachi 3:1 verbatim, but subtly alters it. Consider them together:

Malachi 3:1—Behold, I am going to send My angel, and he will clear the way before My face.

Mark 1:2—Behold, I send My angel before Your face, who will prepare Your way.

Now some of the differences could simply be the result of translating from Hebrew to Greek. However, the Malachi prophecy has God saying that His angel will prepare the way for himself. Mark has God sending an angel to prepare the way for someone else. Why is Mark changing the passage?

I would suggest<sup>4</sup> that Mark is intentionally combining a passage from Exodus with the passage from Malachi in order to introduce the prophecy from Isaiah.

Exodus 23:20—Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.

<sup>3</sup> I diverged from the NASB by translating “angel” or “messenger” (the same word) as “proclaimer.” I also translated “gospel” as “joyful proclamation.” I am trying to show the close relationship between verses 1 and 2 anchored in the similarity between *evangelion* (“good news” or “gospel”) and *angellon* (“angel” or “messenger”).

<sup>4</sup> Following Austin Farrar, *A Study in Saint Mark* (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1952), 55.

Malachi 3:1—Behold, I am going to send My angel, and he will clear the way before My face.

Mark 1:2—Behold, I send My angel before Your face, who will prepare Your way.

What do these two Old Testament passages mean, taken together as an interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy? The passage from Exodus is God's promise to Moses to lead the Israelites by His angel through the wilderness away from Egypt to the Promised Land. The prophecy of Malachi is God's promise to once again visit His people in a visible way for salvation and judgment.

God did not give a prophecy to Malachi that only happened to accidentally sound like his words to Moses. God's Word is not prone to accidents. There are similarities between what the people desired at the time of Malachi and what they were hoping for in the wilderness. The people of Israel in the wilderness were not simply moving to a better place; they were moving to a place where God promised to dwell with them.

Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way, and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. But if you will truly obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My angel will go before you and bring you in to the land of the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will completely destroy them. (Exod. 23:20–23)

Notice that God's presence, mediated by His angel bearing His name, is the key to their victory and acquisition of a new land. That angel was the Lord Himself who had led them out of Egypt as a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13:21), the same angel who, in a flaring cloud, protected the Israelites from the Egyptian army (Exod. 14:19), and the same angel who descended on that dark cloud upon Mount Sinai (Exod. 19:16). Indeed, Moses sums up their entire journey through the wilderness by saying, "when we cried out to the Lord, He heard our voice and sent an angel and brought us out from Egypt" (Num. 20:16). That

angel, of course, is the Lord Jesus himself, the one whom Mark's Gospel is written about.

It is important to remember that the Angel of the Lord dwelt within the Tabernacle Moses built. God's presence with His people was the whole point of the structure. As he told Moses, "Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8). After the Tabernacle was built, the cloud on Mount Sinai moved into it (Exod. 40:34–38). When God threatened to only lead them out of the wilderness at a distance, Moses was not happy.

Then the Lord spoke to Moses . . . "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, lest I destroy you on the way." . . . Then Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people!' But You Yourself have not let me know whom You will send with me. Moreover, You have said, 'I have known you by name, and you have also found favor in My sight.' Now therefore, I pray You, if I have found favor in Your sight, let me know Your ways, that I may know You, so that I may find favor in Your sight. Consider too, that this nation is Your people." And He said, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?" (Exod. 33:1a, 3, 12–16)

The reason Moses was not happy was that acquisition of the Land, as important as that was, was not of much value to him if God was not with them. Essential to the program of entering the Promised Land was doing so with God's visible presence in their midst. Without God's presence in the Tabernacle in the middle of the twelve tribes of Israel, the trip was simply not worth making.

This helps us understand why God gave Malachi a prophecy which reminded the hearers and readers of Exodus 23:20. In Malachi's day the Israelites were back in the Land after the return from exile. They had rebuilt the Temple—even though it was relatively dinky (Ezra 3:12, 13). There priests were serving God in His house.



And yet something was wrong. The Land was in jeopardy due to Israel's new sins (Mal. 4:6b). The Temple was not being treated as it should have been treated (Mal. 3:10). The priests were corrupt (Mal. 2:1–9). Despite dwelling in a special land, where God's servants served Him in His dwelling palace, *there was a real sense in which God was absent rather than present*. Geographically, the situation for Malachi was completely unlike the situation for Moses. He was in the Promised Land whereas Moses was in the wilderness. Yet covenantally, the nation of Israel was just as much in the wilderness as the generation of Moses had been. They needed God's presence. Only when He visibly visited His Temple would they truly possess the blessings that God had promised them. As long as God was outside of the Land, in a sense, then so were they, no matter where they were geographically located.

When God promised Moses He would send an angel before them, He was promising to be present with them and lead them out of the wilderness into a place of communion with Himself. In a sense, Malachi is prophesying the same thing. God will end the time of wilderness wandering by entering the Land, coming to His Temple, saving those who trust in Him, and destroying those who do not. For Malachi, as is the case for the Gospel writers, Jerusalem and the Land now count as Egypt and the wilderness. God must re-enter the land for it to truly be the Promised Land. Even though Malachi's people are already settled geographically, they still need to be saved by God's presence and put in the real Land. God's coming to His Temple is, in a real sense, their exodus out of Egypt and entry into the land. By coming into the Land Himself, God is bringing His people into the Promised Land.

All of this is necessary if Mark's readers are going to understand his invocation of Isaiah 40:3.

The voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Make ready the way of the Lord, Make His paths straight."

Mark has already alluded to this passage by speaking of his document as a "gospel." By quoting this passage Mark is not simply extracting an *ad hoc* proof-text but offering a comprehensive explanation for who Jesus is and why John the Baptist preceded Him.

He is also giving his readers a hint of what is going to happen in the rest of his story. The only way to grasp this is to have this portion of Scripture firmly in mind. Let us read it together:

“Comfort, O comfort My people,” says your God.  
 “Speak kindly to Jerusalem;  
 And call out to her, that her warfare has ended,  
 That her iniquity has been removed,  
 That she has received of the Lord’s hand  
 Double for all her sins.”

A voice is calling, “Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness;  
 Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.  
 Let every valley be lifted up,  
 And every mountain and hill be made low;  
 And let the rough ground become a plain,  
 And the rugged terrain a broad valley;  
 Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
 And all flesh will see it together;  
 For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”  
 A voice says, “Call out.”  
 Then he answered, “What shall I call out?”  
 All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 When the breath of the Lord blows upon it;  
 Surely the people are grass.  
 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
 But the word of our God stands forever.

Get yourself up on a high mountain,  
 O Zion, bearer of *the gospel*.  
 Lift up your voice mightily,  
 O Jerusalem, bearer of *the gospel*;  
 Lift it up, do not fear.  
 Say to the cities of Judah,  
 “Here is your God!” (emphasis added)

The odds are that, if you are a Christian reader, you have been taught—correctly—that this is a prophecy of Jesus Christ and His ministry. But we need to do some study to understand *how it works* as a prophecy. Isaiah’s original readers would have—again correctly—read this passage in the context of Isaiah’s own life and its place in his book. The last thing mentioned just before this prophecy is Isaiah’s confrontation with Hezekiah:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, "Hear the word of the Lord of hosts, 'Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and all that your fathers have laid up in store to this day shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,' says the Lord. 'And some of your sons who shall issue from you, whom you shall beget, shall be taken away; and they shall become officials in the palace of the king of Babylon.'" Then Hezekiah said to Isaiah, "The word of the Lord which you have spoken is good." For he thought, "For there will be peace and truth in my days."

It is in the shadow of this prediction of the Babylonian exile that we are given a glorious prophecy that there will be "a highway for our God." This is a promise of a *return from exile* to the Promised Land. Not only is this made clear by the immediate context of Isaiah 39, but from the wider context as well. Early on in Isaiah, the Lord laments that "My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge" (Is. 5:13). Later, Isaiah will explicitly promise the return for the exiles (49:21; 51:14).

Thus the "highway for our God" is *the highway by which He promises to lead the captives away from Babylon back to the Promised Land*. In fact, God through Isaiah explicitly compares the journey from Babylon to the exodus from Egypt.

Awake, awake,  
 Clothe yourself in your strength, O Zion;  
 Clothe yourself in your beautiful garments,  
 O Jerusalem, the holy city.  
 For the uncircumcised and the unclean  
 Will no more come into you.  
 Shake yourself from the dust, rise up,  
 O captive Jerusalem;  
 Loose yourself from the chains around your neck,  
 O captive daughter of Zion.

For thus says the Lord, "You were sold for nothing and you will be redeemed without money." For thus says the Lord God, "My people went down at the first into Egypt to reside there, then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what do I have here," declares the Lord, "seeing that My people have been taken away without cause?" *Again* the Lord declares, "Those who rule over them howl, and My name is continually blasphemed all day long. Therefore My people shall know My name; therefore in that day I am the one who is speaking, 'Here I am.'"