

Jesus' New World Order

Message 1

Good News for Lehigh

Mark 1:1-15

Waiting

Have you ever wanted something so bad you thought you would die before you got it? I bet you have. What about when you were a child? Didn't it seem like an eternity until your birthday arrived? Did you think your parents delayed family vacation until summer just to tease you? And weren't the long, dark weeks until Christmas pure torture? I sure had trouble waiting patiently for these big occasions, and I bet you did, too. As we grow up the desires shift, but the struggle continues. For most of you it was not too long ago that you looked forward to getting your learner's permit and then your driver's license. Did your 15th year just crawl by? Perhaps you are dating someone, or wish to date someone. Dating is filled with uncertainty, and longing to know that you have found someone who understands and pleases you. It's hard to wait when we want something so badly. And maybe you are here with deep desires that never seem to be met. Perhaps you are in much the same situation as the Jews in Jesus' day.

The opening chapter of Mark is set in a situation of intense longing, of long waiting. The Jews had been waiting for several hundred years to be rescued from the oppression of their enemies, and now their wait may be over.

Several hundred years! What a length of time. What is the longest you ever waited for something? A month? A year? A century? We haven't even lived a century, but here were people holding on to a hope passed down from their parents and grandparents. Now, you are probably thinking, "What reason do they have to expect an answer after all these years?" Good question. If I promised you a dinner at my house, but still had not delivered a decade later, you would rightly think I had gone back on my promise. But if you had been my friend for a lifetime, and knew that I *always* kept my word, instead, you would conclude that I had been delayed in keeping my promise. You would hold out hope that I would come through.

Waiting for God

This was the case with the Jews in Jesus' day. They kept hoping for God to rescue them because He always had in the past. Long ago God had called Abraham and promised to give him the land of Canaan to settle in. It took 400 years, but God came through on the promise. Along the way, God kept other promises. He gave Abraham a son even though his wife was infertile. He protected Jacob from his murderous brother and treacherous uncle, according to promise. He gave David the throne of Israel and Solomon great wisdom. When the people rebelled against God and were captured by the Babylonians, He sent the Persians to set them free and enable them to return home – 70 years after the exile, exactly as promised.

But the most defining moment in the history of the Jews was their rescue from Egypt. The parallels with the situation in Jesus' day are striking. In both cases, the people were oppressed by a huge foreign power. Nothing could challenge Egypt in 1300 B.C., and no one could withstand the crushing might of the Roman legions now. They were helpless to break free. In both cases, the people had God's promise of deliverance. God had spoken to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and told them that their descendants would reside in Egypt and then move to Canaan. Later, God spoke through His prophets about a great and glorious day in which He would visit His people and save them. The people had a real basis for hoping God would rescue them. Consequently, there is a parallel in the response of the people. In both cases they called out to God for salvation. It is not so evident in this passage before us, but throughout the gospels it is clear that the Jews were praying for God to remember and fulfill His promises.

What are those promises? They are far too many to list. They are found throughout the whole Old Testament – in fact the whole Old Testament points to the coming of the Messiah. From Adam’s first sin in the garden to the final words of the prophets, God kept promising to send a definitive deliverer – one who would put matters right for ever. This is the true goal and message of the Old Testament. God’s purpose in calling Abraham and Israel to be his people was not merely to bless them, but, as He said right in the beginning to Abraham, so that “all the families in the world might be blessed through you.” The promise to Adam was a son who would destroy the serpent who had led them into sin, and it is this savior that is the hope of God’s people.

Toward the end of the Old Testament, the prophets began to teach with greater clarity and frequency about the nature of this savior. Isaiah said,

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

Isaiah 2:2,4

This is a wonderful and glorious prophecy. Surely you can see why the Jews were hungry for its fulfillment. But not all the prophecies were so sunny. At the end of the Old Testament, Malachi had some severe words for God’s people. The Jews were very faithful in their religious duties, but Malachi accused them of hypocrisy. They performed the sacrifices, but in a sloppy or half-hearted way. They did not really love God that much. He urged and commanded them to turn back to God before God came to punish them. He said,

Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me.
And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple;
and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight,
behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

Malachi 3:1

So the Lord himself will come to these half-hearted believers, right into the temple where they are performing their sloppy worship! But before He comes, He will send a messenger, someone who will prepare for His arrival. Later Malachi elaborates on this messenger, saying “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.” (Malachi 4:5)

Thus, the Jews knew to look for a savior, and they knew to look for his messenger to precede him. God had always helped them before. He had always rescued them from their enemies, and they were sure He would come through for them again.

God Arrives

So when we come to the gospel of Mark and read that John began preaching to the Jews to turn from their sin, we can understand the intensity of excitement that was present. For when they went out to the

desert, what did they see, but Elijah! Elijah was one figure in the Bible who was uniquely identified by his dress. In the book of 2 Kings the king of Israel sent out a messenger who was intercepted by an unidentified figure. The messenger returned to the king with the message. It was not until the king asked what the stranger looked like that he knew he was Elijah.

It's like me with my briefcase. I notice none of you brought a briefcase this evening. But I almost always carry mine. So if you walked through the Food Court downstairs and saw a brown briefcase on a table, you would know I was in the building.

Who would live in the desert, wear a coarse camel's hair shirt and leather belt, and eat locusts with honey? No one but Elijah. So when the Jews saw this strange figure preaching that they should repent and prepare for the Lord, they knew it was the fulfillment of Malachi's prophecy, and God was on the way.

John's ministry brought the Jews to a fever pitch of excitement. Imagine, they might see what the patriarchs and kings had hoped for! The Romans driven out! Jerusalem the center of whole world! Peace and prosperity for everyone! Who wouldn't be excited? You also would walk for days into the desert to see and hear someone promising this. Then at the peak of excitement Jesus was baptized and began to preach also. His message was, "The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel."

It's over, folks! The wait is past. The prophecies are now going to be fulfilled. But not all at once. When He says, "The Kingdom of God is at hand," He means very close, but not here yet. This phrase translates the Greek word *εγγυς*. It is as if someone is just around the corner. If you were in your dorm room and heard distinctive footsteps, you might say, "That's my roommate coming." She is not in your presence, but she is almost close enough to touch. When she rounds the corner, she will have arrived. Jesus is saying, with His arrival, the Kingdom of God is so close you can almost touch it, but it is not fully present.

Jesus then calls people to turn away from their sin and believe the gospel – i.e. His message. Believe what He says about God, and God's Kingdom, and sin, and how to live. Now, why should the Jews believe what Jesus says, and why should they do what he teaches? Because if it is true, if He is the savior promised from the beginning, if He is going to defeat the Romans, if He is going to rule in Jerusalem – they would be *insane* not to follow Him! Why deliberately ignore Him, and then find yourself outside His Kingdom? Who in his right mind would choose to remain in slavery when there is one who is offering to deliver him? Of course, the Jews misunderstood the exact nature of Jesus' Kingdom. He did not drive out the Romans, but He did something much better – He drove out Satan. But their incomplete understanding did not keep them from the truth that He was the promised savior. No, if Jesus is really the one promised by the prophets, the only choice is to believe Him.

Jesus the King

Well, all this happened almost 2,000 years ago, and we live in a very different world now, don't we? How ever could all this relate to your experience as a Lehigh student? It relates very much. In fact this scripture is aimed right at you here tonight. For the most basic thing that God wants to do with you is convince you that Jesus is the answer to your problems and the one who ought to guide your life. You are not chaffing under a foreign army, but you have your own hurts and disappointments, goals and aspirations.

Jesus did not come to bring a philosophy. He did not come to establish a moral code. He came to set up a Kingdom. His message never changes. It is that now is the time, Christ is here establishing His Kingdom. Stop doing things your own way and listen to what He says. Jesus is the King. He is in charge. Why should you ignore Him? Are you trying to anger your King? Why should you disobey Him? Do you

want to ruin your life? Do you believe Him, or do think He is lying to us?

Christ established His Kingdom almost 2,000 years ago, and He keeps calling people into it. The good news for Lehigh is that Jesus has not abandoned us. He is here. We are not left on our own, to struggle through life by ourselves. Jesus does not promise to grant all your desires, but He does promise to love you forever. He will give you gifts no one else can ever give – peace and joy, and a place in His Kingdom. He will take you, with your hopes and dreams and make something of you. But only if you believe Him.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
August 28, 2007