

DAY 1 | MARK 1:14-15

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

It Has Begun

by Kessia Reyne Bennett

We live in a crazy, conflicted cosmos. Our world bears witness to the controversy raging all around and within us. The powers of good and evil battle for human hearts and earthly affairs. This world is a bloody battlefield of war zones and broken homes, of debates and earthquakes, of poverty and anxiety, of deforestation and human exploitation.

Something better is coming—and coming soon! Soon Jesus is coming to make all things all new. “We have this hope that burns within our hearts, hope in the coming of the Lord.” On the great day of Jesus’ return, God will enact a renewal and recreation that cannot be stopped by any power. All the chaos will be calm, all the conflict will be cured. Heaven at last! Hallelujah!

But in the meantime, we live “in the meantime.” We live in the meantime between the perfect Eden of creation and the restored Eden of recreation. In this meantime, though our hearts long for heaven, our feet are planted firmly in the dirt of this crazy, conflicted cosmos.

If only heaven could begin now . . . Could it? Would it be possible for God to bring heaven to earth just a little ahead of schedule and for us to enjoy that kingdom now? Imagine if heaven could begin here. That’s what we want, isn’t it? That’s why, following the example of our Lord, we pray, “May Your kingdom come, may Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” If only we could live in heaven now!



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The good news is—! Well, I wouldn't want to spoil it for you. I'll let Jesus tell you Himself. Turn with me to Mark 1:14-15. Listen for the good news of God! "After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" (Mark 1:14, 15 NIV). Jesus was proclaiming, preaching, announcing the good news of God. And what is that good news? "The time has come" and "the kingdom of God has come near." The good news of God that Jesus was proclaiming is still good news today! "The time has come" and "the kingdom of God has come near."

The Time Has Come

Jesus said the time had come. What clock was He reading? A fancy, first-century wristwatch? Maybe He pulled out His mobile phone to check the time? The time that Jesus is talking about can't be read off of a screen or found on a wall calendar. This isn't the kind of time that tells you that you need to go to your next class or the kind of time that tells you that you really, really, really need to get up because you've hit the snooze button three times and you're going to miss your bus! No, this is the kind of time that's woven with hope, the kind of time that God had marked out in ages long ago, the kind of time that gives tempo to the plan of redemption—it is prophetic time.

And that prophetic clock began to tick and tock as soon as Eve and Adam ate that forbidden fruit and opened the world up to an inconceivable darkness. Right there, in the desecrated Garden of Eden, the Lord made a promise, telling Eve that her offspring would crush the enemy, Satan (Genesis 3:15). When Eve first became pregnant, she hoped the time had come, that Cain was the promised one. But the time had not yet come. And God kept the hope alive, kept making these wild promises of a child who would save the world and promises of God dwelling with humans and promises of God's kingship at last! Promises of peace and abundance and healing and neverending life.

In Abraham's day, the time had not yet come. In Moses' day, the time had not yet come. In David's day, the time had not yet come. In Isaiah's day, the time had not yet come. In Daniel's day, the time had not yet come. In Malachi's day, the time had not yet come.

But one day, the time had come. A virgin conceived, a baby was born, poor and lowly and perfect, a child grew, a man appeared, and that man Jesus started shouting out, "The time has come!" The time is fulfilled. The hope of the ages, the desire of the nations, the longing of every human heart from Eve to Mary to you—He has come. Immanuel: "God with us." Jesus, "Salvation." The time has come! The wisdom of the sages and the words of the prophets are fulfilled. The time has come! In Jesus, God fulfills every promise to humanity for His presence, for His action, for His Kingship. The rich beauty and deep goodness of the kingdom of God had, up to this point, been only promise. But now, the time had come! In Jesus, God moved from promise to fulfillment. The kingdom of God had come near.

Yes, the kingdom of God has come near. A little bit of heaven shining through to earth, the heavenly dimension breaking into our earthly realities. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near.

The Kingdom of God

When we hear Jesus announce something as remarkable as the kingdom of God, we want to know some specifics. What is this thing? What is it like? Mark doesn't give us a table of contents for this kingdom; he doesn't give us the ingredients like a recipe sheet. Masterfully, instead of telling us what the kingdom of God is, Mark writes his gospel to show us.

Let's watch what Jesus does and we'll see what the Kingdom is about.

In chapter 1, verses 16-20, Jesus calls Simon and Andrew and James and John. He begins gathering a community that, from the very outset, is focused on outreach. "'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him" (Mark 1:17, 18 NIV).

In verse 20, Jesus teaches those gathered in the synagogue.

In verses 21-26, Jesus casts out a demon.

In verses 29-31, Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law of a terrible fever.

In verses 32-34, Jesus heals the sick and demon-possessed.

In verse 35, Jesus rises up in the dark part of the morning to commune with God in prayer. Then he begins again, traveling, teaching, preaching, and healing.

In chapter 2, Jesus publicly forgives the sins of the paralytic and heals his limbs. He reaches out to a despised Jewish tax-collector and has dinner with the losers of the town. Then He reclaims the Sabbath as "made for man, not man for the Sabbath" and announces Himself as "Lord even of the Sabbath."

In chapter 3, He heals on that day, restoring to the Sabbath its healing purpose. Then He calls twelve apostles in order to send them out with the gospel and the power to overthrow demons.

In chapter 4, He teaches over and over and over again about the mystery of the Kingdom. How it is not like the kingdoms of this world, not coercive and violent. How it is meant to be shared, how it grows and operates by the power of God, how it starts small but grows big.

Then Mark starts demonstrating the power of the kingdom in major ways. First, in chapter 4, Jesus calms the storm. With just a few words, He silences the wind and masters the storm. Jesus is Lord of the natural world. Then, in chapter 5, Mark recounts how Jesus brought salvation to the lost case of the man possessed by a legion of demons. With the power of His word, He brought freedom to the lunatic and overthrew the stronghold of demonic power. Jesus is Lord of the spirit world. Then Jesus heals a woman who had been sick for more than twelve years with an incurable disease. Jesus is Lord over disease. And then—THEN!—He raises from the dead a young girl of twelve, restoring her life and restoring the joy of her parents. Jesus is Lord over death.

On and on and on it goes, the story of Jesus enacting the kingdom of God in the world. And what is it? It is community, it is outreach, it is freedom from demonic power, it is physical healing, it is sins forgiven, it is true doctrine, it is a Sabbath experience, it is liberty from fear and it is hope beyond disease and death, it is communion with God and dinner with sinners. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. A little bit of heaven shining through to earth, the heavenly dimension breaking into our earthly realities. In Jesus, the kingdom of God has come near. Heaven has begun here. "The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near."

If only we could begin to live in heaven now... And we can! Because in Jesus, heaven has begun here.

So, how can we live in heaven now? Jesus tells us that too! Mark 1:15. "'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'" How can we live in heaven now? Repent and believe the good news!

Living in Heaven Now

To repent is to turn around, to let go of sin as we grasp the Savior. We walk no longer in our own ways, but in the ways of the Lord. We are no longer master of our plans, but we choose Jesus as our Lord. In the light of Christ's goodness we see our badness and we cast ourselves on His mercy. We ask for repentance and He gives it to us: a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of life.

Sometimes we have the mistaken idea that we must repent before we can come to Jesus. We think, "FIRST, I must sorrow for sin and reform, THEN I will turn to Jesus and will receive His grace." But nothing could be more useless than this! Repentance does not stand between the sinner and the Savior; it is not an obstacle we must overcome before we reach Jesus. No, no! It is a gift we receive only from His hand. We must go to Jesus to receive repentance! He says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). So let us come to Jesus, weary and burdened, and ask for the gift of repentance. "Make us see our sin as You see it, Jesus. Make us see the beauty of holiness as you lived it, Jesus. Make us repentant."

How do we enter into the heaven that Jesus brought near? Let's picture the kingdom of God on earth as a network of large and small outposts inside enemy territory. Inside each outpost are the most wonderful things: delicious foods, warm fellowship, healing and wellness, peace and joy. Hearing what's inside, we want to enter, of course. Eagerly we rush in, hearing the sound of laughter and rejoicing, almost tasting those almond croissants. But as we attempt to cross the threshold, we're stopped.

"What seems to be the problem? Why can't I enter?"

"Friend, before you can enter this place, you must lay down your weapons."

Repentance is the laying down of our weapons: humbling our rebel hearts before the King and giving up what we thought were our rights and receiving instead what we find to be His best gifts.

"The time has come," Jesus proclaimed. "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent! and believe the good news."

The second condition for experiencing heaven on earth is to believe the good news, to trust in the message of Jesus. Believe and trust. Sounds too simple, doesn't it? But it really is that simple! Believe and trust the message and experience heaven on earth. When we put our trust in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, we have opened the door for them to enter our lives in deep and meaningful ways. In place of loneliness, we find companionship. In place of restlessness, we find rest. In place of emptiness, we find abundance. In place of confusion, we find purpose. In place of sickness, we find healing. In place of error, we find truth. In place of selfishness, we find love. In place of despair, we find hope.

"The time has come," Jesus proclaimed. "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent! and believe the good news!" In Jesus, heaven has begun here. We let go of sin and grab on to Him because He is the *door* into heaven now and to come, He is the *way* of heaven now and to come, He is the *light* of heaven now and to come. In Jesus, heaven has begun here.

In *Desire of Ages*, the inspired writer Ellen White put it well: “As through Jesus we enter into rest, heaven begins here. We respond to His invitation, Come, learn of Me, and in thus coming we begin the life eternal. Heaven is a ceaseless approaching to God through Christ. The longer we are in the heaven of bliss, the more and still more of glory will be opened to us; and the more we know of God, the more intense will be our happiness. As we walk with Jesus in this life, we may be filled with His love, satisfied with His presence. All that human nature can bear, we may receive here” (331).

Amazing! For those who trust in the message of Christ, eternal life begins now. It will only get better as Jesus returns; the earth will be recreated and God will make His home here forever and we will dwell in His light. We cannot even fathom the incredible delights of eternal life in the New Jerusalem. We cannot even conceive of the wondrous excellence of life on the earth made new. The heaven of eternity will be more than our hearts can even desire! But we don’t have to wait to start enjoying the experience of heaven now. We can get a foretaste here; we can, right now, enjoy a big mouthful of heaven! Knowing Jesus, walking with Him, trusting in His message: heaven has begun here.

The Kingdom in Action

This sermon is long, but Jesus’ was short: “The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” Will you? Will you enter the Kingdom now? Will you say yes, lay down your weapons, and enter the delight of His fellowship? Jesus and I are both praying you will.

And this crazy, conflicted cosmos needs you to. This world is full of hurt, full of people in error and confusion, full of people broken by sin and weighed down with despair, full of people bound by the enemy and full of people lost in loneliness. They need you to say yes to Jesus and to become an agent for this Kingdom come near. Help them also to come into heaven begun here.

When we look at Jesus’ life, we see the Kingdom in action. It is community, it is outreach, it is freedom from demonic power, it is physical healing, it is sins forgiven,

it is true doctrine, it is a Sabbath experience, it is liberty from fear and it is hope beyond disease and death, it is communion with God and dinner with sinners.

One day, soon, what Jesus started here He will return to finish. He'll break through the sky and come with the trump of the archangel. He'll resurrect the dead, He'll bind Satan for one thousand years, He'll recreate the earth, and He'll make God's permanent home here. Listen to the words of Revelation 21:1-4:

"Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

What a joy heaven will be! What a wondrous joy!

But in the meantime, may we never ever forget that, in Jesus, heaven has begun here. Friends, won't you say yes to this promise, lay down your weapons, and enter? The time has come. The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news! ●