

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

Feasting And Fasting

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Mark 2:18-22

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Mark 2:18; that’s on page 837 in your pew Bibles. This is the third of five consecutive conflict stories in Mark’s Gospel that demonstrate the singular authority and significance of Jesus Christ. Hear now the infallible, inspired, authoritative and inerrant Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 18.

18 Now John’s disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, “Why do John’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?” 19 And Jesus said to them, “Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. 20 The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. 21 No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. 22 And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins.” (Mark 2:18–22 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God.

As always – and particularly in these conflict stories – the primary focus of this passage is on the identity and significance of Jesus Christ. Mark is systematically building the case he laid out for us in the very first verse of his Gospel. He said in Mark 1:1:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1 ESV)

So right at the beginning, Mark puts all his cards face up on the table. He says that Jesus is the

Christ – he is the Messiah, he is the King and more than that, Mark says, he is the Son of God. He is ALL that Mark says and I’m going to prove it to you. So remembering that we understand that the first question we should always be asking when we read these stories is:

What Does This Story Reveal About The Identity And Significance Of Jesus Christ?

Well in this story we see three things in particular. We see first of all that:

1. Jesus is the Messianic Bridegroom

What prompts Jesus to say what he says in this story is a question about fasting. Fasting was one of the three pillars of Judaism. Jews prayed, fasted and gave alms to the poor as regular expressions of their religious piety. Jesus’ disciples did a lot of praying and Jesus taught a great deal on charity towards the poor but he did not seem to place a great deal of emphasis on fasting and people wanted to know why. And Jesus answers their pretty mundane question with an absolutely marvelous revelation. He says:

“Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. (Mark 2:19 ESV)

Now that is an absolutely massive theological statement at the centre of which Jesus unambiguously claims that HE IS THE MESSIANIC BRIDEGROOM. You can’t miss that. The question was: “Why don’t YOUR disciples fast?” The answer is “Because I am the Bridegroom and I am here in the midst of my people”. Wow! That’s what Jesus says! They can’t fast because everything that Judaism has been hoping and longing for is here now in ME. That’s what Jesus is saying. D.A. Carson says:

“Here is Jesus, profoundly self-aware, deeply conscious that he himself is the messianic bridegroom, and that in his immediate presence the proper response is joy.”¹

The kingdom of God is at hand because the king is here in our midst – and that is cause for joy – that is a cause for feasting not fasting, that is what Jesus says but if you are a Bible reader you notice that inside of what Jesus said is something even more remarkable.

¹ D.A. Carson, *For The Love Of God* Volume 1 (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), devotional for January 30th.

The coming of the Messianic Kingdom was associated in the Old Testament with gladness and feasting – of that there is no doubt. We see that for example in Isaiah 25:6 where it says:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. (Isaiah 25:6. ESV)

The Messianic era is like a feast with rich food and well-aged wine. The text goes on to say:

He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, “Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.” (Isaiah 25:8–9 ESV)

Now Jesus shows up and he says: “Its on! I’m here! Let the party begin!” I’m the Messiah – I am the Lord of the feast!” But then Jesus takes that one step further – he ramps it up. He says not only is this going to be a FEAST its going to be a wedding feast – the biggest feast of them all! That was new - the Old Testament never depicted the Messianic banquet as a “wedding feast”. That would be weird – that would be almost inappropriate because in the Old Testament the “bridegroom” – the husband of the covenant community was not the Messiah it was God himself. The Bible says that in Isaiah 54:5:

For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called. (Isaiah 54:5 ESV)

Ok – so according to the Old Testament God himself – the Creator God – the God of the whole earth – he is the husband of the covenant community. God is the bridegroom.

So what is Jesus doing here? What is he is saying? He is bringing together two streams of Old Testament anticipation – he is bringing together two metaphors. He is saying to anyone who has ears to hear: “I am the Messiah! I’m the King! I’m the Lord of the feast! I’m the one who brings the blessings and the joy! And P.S. I am God. I am your husband, you are my people and this is going to be better than you could have ever asked for, hoped for or imagined.”

That is the incredible answer that Jesus gives to a rather routine question about fasting and that is the first and the most important thing we learn about Jesus in this passage.

But there is more. We also learn that:

2. The coming of Jesus changes everything

There are three metaphors or mini-parables in this little story. The first one reveals that Jesus is the Messianic Bridegroom, the next two reveal that the coming of Jesus changes absolutely everything. Look at verses 21-22:

No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins. (Mark 2:21–22 ESV)

These two little parables have a simple message: the coming of Jesus is a cataclysmic event that changes absolutely everything! It demands new forms, new expressions and new responses from God's people. Dennis Nineham says:

“For the fact is that the state of affairs he has inaugurated is quite different from what went before, and the conduct appropriate to it is as incompatible with the practices of Judaism as a new patch with an old garment or new wine with old wineskins.”²

You can't just keep celebrating the Jewish feasts as if everything they looked forward to hasn't already come now in the person of Jesus Christ! The religion of Judaism is fundamentally anticipatory! Everything is looking forward in faith to the prospect of God finally keeping his promises. Judaism looks forward! Christianity looks back and forward – that is a fundamental change that has to be reflected in new forms and ceremonies. And that's what we see. The Passover of the Old Testament becomes The Lord's Supper in the New Testament. Passover was about how God saved the people who took refuge under the blood of a lamb – but it looked forward to another lamb, that's why John the Baptist said:

“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29 ESV)

Jesus is here! Jesus is the lamb we've been waiting for! So you can't keep having a ceremony that looks forward to something you now possess – that doesn't make any sense. So now when we get together what do we celebrate? We celebrate the Lord's Table which we also call the

² D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 102.

Eucharist – the thanksgiving. Christianity is a religion about reception and gratitude! Judaism is a religion about promise and anticipation – that’s totally different and so the forms are going to be different.

That’s why circumcision becomes baptism. Circumcision was a surgery performed on the flesh at the point of desire – not to be too graphic but that’s what it is – it looks forward to the MORE SIGNIFICANT surgery that God promised to perform on the human heart. That is the great and climactic hope of the Old Testament. God says:

I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 11:19 ESV)

The Old Testament looked forward to a game changing surgery on the human heart – circumcision was a sign of that ultimate hope. But you don’t need the sign once you have THE HOPE. That’s why Paul said:

a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. (Romans 2:29 ESV)

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh— (Philippians 3:3 ESV)

Paul says: “We have what they were hoping for! We have the circumcision of the heart! We have the surgery that changes the game! Therefore we don’t the sign anymore – we don’t need to hope for what we already have.”

For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation. (Galatians 6:15 ESV)

Therefore our initiatory rite is not circumcision – you can choose to get circumcised for hygienic reasons but it has ZERO religious significance – our initiatory rite is baptism. Baptism celebrates new creation. Therefore it logically follows not biological birth but spiritual birth. We welcome people into the covenant community upon the profession of faith. New creation is what we celebrate now. That’s why we fly balloons when people get saved and baptized – that’s what we celebrate now in the New Covenant.

And that’s why we gather on the first day of the week and not the last day of the week. You are going to see that conflict in the next two stories in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus claims that as the

Messiah, as the Lord – as God – he has the right to change how the Sabbath is observed. Everything is different now – new creation is the focus therefore the Lord’s Day is on the first day of the week – which is the also the 8th day – the first day of the new creation. The Jews were WAITING for the Sabbath rest of God – so they celebrated the 7th day. Christians are already living in it. Therefore they worship on the 8th day – the 1st day of the everlasting kingdom.

You see? Everything changes because Jesus has come. He is not an “add on” he is new creation. Now of course there is continuity! Of course the Lord’s Table is LIKE the Passover. Of course baptism is LIKE circumcision. Of course the Lord’s Day is like the Sabbath – there are continuities but there is radical discontinuity because the coming of Jesus changes everything! Anticipation becomes fulfillment. Longing becomes possession. Reaching becomes rejoicing because the King has come into our very midst - thanks be to God!

The third thing we see in this story is that:

3. Jesus has come and will leave and will come again

Look carefully at what he says in verse 20:

The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day.
(Mark 2:20 ESV)

So Jesus says, “I’m here and me being here changes everything and that is why my disciples are not fasting” but then he goes on to imply that this situation will change at some point in the future. At some point in the future the bridegroom will be taken away from them and in those days they will fast – what in the world does that mean?

Most scholars believe that it means two things simultaneously. They believe it refers first of all to the death of Jesus, which of course came as a tremendous shock to his disciples. But then in a secondary sense they believe it refers to the ascension of Jesus and the long delay before his ultimate return and the full and final consummation of his kingdom. D.A. Carson for example says:

“The disciples would experience terrible sorrow during the three days of the tomb, before Jesus’ glorious resurrection forever shattered their despair. And in an attenuated sense, Jesus’ disciples would experience cycles of suffering that would call forth days of fasting as they faced assaults of the Evil One while waiting for their Master’s blessed return.”³

So this is another example of Jesus providing a very subtle hint that this coming – his first coming – will not be the only coming. The disciples expected Jesus to do EVERYTHING that the Messiah was supposed to do in a single, definitive, cataclysmic coming and Jesus regularly corrected that misunderstanding. In Luke 19 for example we read that:

As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. (Luke 19:11 ESV)

‘Jesus was the king, the king was here, therefore – what’s the hold up? Let’s get it on! Let’s go to the mountain and begin the great feast of the Lord.’ That’s not bad theology its just not complete. What did they forget? They forgot about sin. Jesus was always making the point that before the party could begin something would have to be done about sin. Remember the fellow who was not wearing the wedding robe? You can’t just march in to the presence and the glory of God covered in your own filth and sin. Sin is going to have to be dealt with and that is the piece that the disciples were slow to see. They didn’t see the cross – they didn’t understand the need for atonement.

And they didn’t remember the promise that the Messianic Banquet would include people from all the nations of the world – but that’s in the Bible. Isaiah 25 says:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make **for all peoples** a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. (Isaiah 25:6. ESV)

For ALL peoples! Right! Its going to be a big party and its going to take a while to gather all the guests – Jesus said that. He said:

this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

Right! So there is some stuff that has to happen before the party can be fully enjoyed. Sin would have to be dealt with and the invitation would have to be extended to men, women, boys and girls

³ Carson, *ibid.*, devotional for January 30th.

from every tribe, tongue and nation. And then the end will come.

And in the meantime God's servants should expect to experience persecution, suffering and sorrow during this long delay. Jesus said:

In the world you will have tribulation. (John 16:33 ESV)

You are going to get cancer. There are going to be car accidents and there is going to be persecution. Jesus spoke about that in the parable of the wedding feast. He said that the king sends out his servants with the invitation to the banquet saying to them:

'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'" 5 But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, 6 while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them. (Matthew 22:4–6 ESV)

Not everybody is going to appreciate your efforts to include them in the kingdom of God. Sometimes they will ignore you, sometimes they will treat you shamefully and sometimes they will even kill you. Jesus didn't say that everybody would come – he said that everyone would hear.

this gospel of the kingdom will be **proclaimed** throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matthew 24:14 ESV)

So during the long delay we will share in the common sufferings of a fallen world and we will endure specific sufferings related to our participation in extending the invitation to all the nations of the world. When that happens – when sorrow visits us randomly or in the execution of our mission – we will fast. We will weep and we will mourn – but not without hope.

Because we are still the people of the king – our place at the banquet is eternally secure. We are **RIGHT NOW** joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod! We are **GLAD** that we're a part of the family of God. Christians are characterized by **GRATITUDE** and **JOY!** We have it **ALL** – kept secure in heaven for us - therefore what can anybody do to us?

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38–39 NIV11-GK)

We have it all when we have Jesus Christ – and it can never ever ever be taken from us. Thanks be to God!

Principles And Application:

Now let's just take a minute and work through some of the very practical principles and applications that should govern our behavior as followers of Jesus Christ during the long delay. I think the first thing we would want to say is this:

1. Christian life and worship should be characterized by gratitude and joy

That seems to be the most obvious implication of this teaching. Jesus seems to be saying that because of all that his first coming signified and accomplished the characteristic attitude of his disciples will be GRATITUDE and JOY. Again, the primary religious ritual of Christians is what? The Lord's Table – the Eucharist which means “the thanksgiving”. We are a thankful people by definition and habit. Gratitude is the major key of Christian worship. Most of our songs should express thanks and joy in the finished work of Christ. This is SO TRUE that Paul can describe joy as THE CHARACTERISTIC FRUIT of saved and Spirit-filled people; he does that in 1 Thessalonians. He says to them that he knows that they are real believers because:

you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thessalonians 1:6 ESV)

You were having hard times and enduring much suffering but when you read the Word and when you understood what God had done for you in Christ – you burst forth with joy! That proves that you get it! Faith reveals itself in joy!

Feasting is the norm for Christian people – joy is our default setting – but there is a place for sorrow, for lamentation and for fasting. That's the second principle we want to point out.

2. Fasting is an appropriate response to the absence of the Lord and the reality of suffering

Fasting is a legitimate minor key in the symphony of Christian life and worship. It is not inappropriate – its not every Sunday but its not inappropriate - because in this world we do have

tribulation. In this world we see through a glass darkly and we long for the appearing of the Lord. That's not wrong – if it were wrong Jesus would not have told us to pray: “Thy kingdom come – thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” There is a lot going on down here that should not be going on. There is a lot of hurt and there is a lot of pain and there is real and terrible suffering and it won't be fully dealt with until Jesus comes again. So it is good, appropriate and normal to long for that glorious day. The Apostle Paul longed for that day. Near the end of his life he said:

Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me but also to **all who have loved his appearing**. (2 Timothy 4:8 ESV)

Fasting is an appropriate expression of your longing for the return of Jesus Christ. It is an appropriate way of saying NO to this fallen world and YES to the world that is to come.

And it can also be used to amplify your prayers in response to particular need. Fasting was understood in Bible times as a prayer magnifier. That seems to be the meaning behind that strange verse we find later in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus explains why only he was able to help a boy possessed by a particular demon – his disciples couldn't do it and he told them why.

“This kind can come out by nothing but prayer and fasting.” (Mark 9:29 NKJV)

When Christians in the early church were preparing for dangerous missions they began with prayer and fasting:

Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:3 ESV)

So fasting in the Bible is a prayer amplifier and is the appropriate response to severe affliction or urgent need.

Thirdly and lastly:

3. When your fast is over, arise, eat and worship the Lord

Fasting is not a prolonged state for people of faith. It is a minor note – it is an occasional act in response to particular suffering – it is not a permanent state. When the young son of King David

became ill David wanted to amplify his prayers on behalf of the child so the Bible says:

David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. (2 Samuel 12:16 ESV)

But God didn't answer David's prayer and the child died – hear that! Fasting is not a way for us to make God do what we want him to do. It makes our prayers louder but it does not make God our servant. David's child died and when he died David did something that surprised his friends and family members.

David arose from the earth and washed and anointed himself and changed his clothes. And he went into the house of the Lord and worshiped. (2 Samuel 12:20 ESV)

How did he do that? What did he know as a person of faith that we need to know? He knew the promises of God - therefore he said:

I shall go to him, but he will not return to me. (2 Samuel 12:23 ESV)

I will see my son again – because God is faithful to his promises! That is the heart and substance of Biblical faith! If David – living before Jesus – before the promises of God took flesh and dwelt among us – if David could move from fasting into worship than how much more can we? No good thing can be taken from those who have faith in Jesus.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you (1 Peter 1:3–4 ESV)

That is the promise that draws you out of fasting – out of sorrow – out of darkness and back into marvelous light. That is the joy in the morning and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.