



## SMALL GROUP STUDIES

AUGUST 2010 | VOL: 3 | NO: 8



**WEEK 1::AUGUST 1**

**A NEW BEGINNING :: MARK 1:1**

Would you agree with the cliché “No news is good news”? From just glancing at *The Denver Post* or turning on the TV, you might possibly concur with the saying. Or if you Google “famous headlines,” you would find that the vast majority has to do with wars, murders, recession/depression, or tragedy.

Not all headlines, though, proclaim bad news. Here are some examples of headlines declaring events that were celebrated:

“VE Day – It’s All Over”  
“Mandela Goes Free Today”  
“The First Footstep”

What events did these proclaim? They announced respectively the ending of World War II in Europe, the release of Nelson Mandela, and Neil Armstrong’s first step on the moon.

So as we approach the Gospel of Mark, what are we to make of Mark’s bold title for his account in verse one: “The beginning of the gospel (good news) about Jesus Christ, the son of God”?

The context of what was being written (the other gospel accounts and epistles) and the context of even these first lines in Mark’s account make it clear that people were excited about and in awe of all the events surrounding Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, not to mention all that was happening in and through his team of followers in the early Church movement. Since the arrival of John and his baptizing in the surrounding areas (v. 4), people were beginning to realize that God was up to something big. Wording John the Baptist used as recorded by Mark (“...but *He* will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” v. 8) was filled with anticipation.

So what was Jesus’ beginning? Was he reforming Judaism? Was he beginning a new religion or a new sect within Judaism? Does this have anything to do with the beginning of a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 2:10) and a new role for the followers of Jesus? Does this represent a new identity for God’s people?

What was the gospel, or “good news,” to which Mark refers? Was it that Jesus died on the cross to pay for people’s sins? Certainly, that is good news, but is this good news bigger than my own personal salvation? And is it beneficial to summarize this good news in a few short lines or in an outline, as many do, so that we can communicate it quickly? Can this good news be summed up and packaged in a formula such as, “Believe this, pray this prayer and you and everything in your life will be okay”? Or do we need to take the necessary time to dig deeply into the meaning of this news and digest its meaning well, so that we can live it out for the world to see?



And why was Jesus named “Christ”? Was this a title or his surname? Or does it speak to the anticipation and passion of the Hebrew people that we see in the hearts and lives of the early followers of Jesus? Are we ever guilty of reading past the name “Christ” in the Scriptures or uttering the name of “Christ” in prayer or in profanity without thinking deeply of its significance?

If we understand that the gospel is good news indeed, then it behooves us to know what that good news was in its original historical setting, not just how it is interpreted and taught to us today, and to ponder deeply how God desires for us to live it out in our world today.

#### RELATED VERSES

Psalm 19  
John 1:1-18  
Jeremiah 31:33-34  
Mark 1:14-15  
Ephesians 2:14-22

#### DISCUSSION STARTERS

Imagine for a couple of minutes what it must have been like to be one of the witnesses of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Imagine also that as a group you *had* been the eye witnesses and you had been living and walking with Jesus up until a few months or weeks ago when you experienced for yourself his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. Would there be any disparity between that picture and what your actual life looks like today? How and why?

#### QUESTIONS

In discussing New Creation Theology, N. T. Wright sees creation and covenant as being joined together and described in Psalm 19. Verses 1-6, he says, speak of creation singing God’s praise, and then, in verses 7-11, God’s people through their covenant relationship with God, singing their praises. Wright makes this connection: “Torah does in human life what the sun does within creation: it brings the light, power and searching, probing heat of YHWH’s presence into the depths of the human heart.”<sup>1</sup>

Read Psalm 19 and John 1:1-18. If Wright is correct, what connection might we make regarding our identity in the new creation? What difference does John 1:14 make in the life of the Church as compared to Israel’s role? How might we continue Jesus’ ministry as described in John 1:18: “...the one and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

Consider Jeremiah 31:33-34. Discuss as a group how this applies today and how and why it is good news to us. Talk about how you see this blessing being lived out in your lives. Read also Mark 1:14-15 and discuss what might help you as individuals or as a group to live this good news out more completely.

Read Ephesians 2:14-22. Dialog about how Jesus’ death and resurrection makes unity and serving together possible. How does holding grudges and being unable to forgive affect the

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, “Creation and Covenant,” [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright\\_Creation\\_Covenant.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Creation_Covenant.htm).



Church's ability to live out the new creation? Give examples of how you have seen differences between groups and individuals deter the Lord's work, or give examples of how reconciliation between people brought on a new effectiveness in the furtherance of the gospel.

**ACTION STEP**

Follow the same line of thought taken from Ephesians 2:14-22. Discuss as a group specific realities that might be keeping you from living out God's new creation. Discuss what needs to happen to change this reality and plan steps to carry out that change.



# SMALL GROUP STUDIES

AUGUST 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:8

## WEEK ONE NOTES



**WEEK 2::AUGUST 8**

**THE EXCLUSIVE ALLEGIANCE :: MARK 1:1**

Ok, I admit it.

I pray for my football team.

It's not obvious like it was when I was a kid, folding my hands and bowing my head just before kickoff, ending my prayers with "and that nobody gets hurt" to legitimize them at the last second.

Now it's more subtle, like a quick "Please!" under my breath when the field goal attempt is in midair or the chain gang comes out to measure for a first down. I know it's ridiculous like I've known it's ridiculous since I was a kid, because it hasn't worked all that well. Deep down I know that there's a kid rooting for the other team (even the Raiders) who has his hands folded and head bowed in prayer, petitioning God on behalf of his squad. I know that God doesn't play favorites when it comes to sports teams. There's no need for a lengthy debate on the topic. No one would wholeheartedly and truthfully make a logical argument that their team is the Lord's and that it is His will that they wipe the floor with their opponents.

Would they?

In Glasgow, Scotland, a place not so different from here, there exists a soccer rivalry that has been ongoing since 1888. The "Old Firm," as it is called, between Rangers and Celtic is one of the fiercest rivalries in the world. Rangers fans are overwhelmingly Protestant, while Celtic supporters are almost exclusively Catholic. This sectarian divide is firmly entrenched in Glasgow's history and plays a large role in this modern Western city to this day. Every year, violence punctuates the game and hoopla surrounding it, with dozens of assaults and even murders stemming from the bitter feud.

As people separated from the situation, we can look on this rivalry with despair or even contempt: How can people take a sport so seriously? Do they seriously believe that their faith, that God is moved one way or the other because of a soccer game?

Perhaps we shouldn't be so dismissive. A quick look at the American church may show that we believe that God is on the side of our systems. What about government or nationhood or economic structures? How many times as Americans have we assumed God's support? How many times have our leaders invoked the name of Jesus to legitimize their authority? We may say that we believe that no nation has an exclusive claim to God, but do we really act that way?

The Gospel of Mark was most likely the earliest of all the gospels, probably written within 30 or 40 years of Jesus's death and resurrection. The Romans, the empire that had condemned Jesus to death, still ruled. They believed that their empire was ordained by the gods, never to end, and they ruthlessly struck down those who held any loyalty higher than their allegiance to Rome. Being found with a copy of a story that claimed anyone other than Caesar ruled supreme would have been grounds for execution.



It is into this world that we have the first written account of the Christian gospel. The early Christians realized that to participate in the Kingdom of God, one must reject all other rulers.

**RELATED VERSES**

- Matthew 4:1-11
- Matthew 19:16-24
- John 18:35-36
- Daniel 2:37-38
- John 19:10-11

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**

Why is it so uncomfortable to discuss earthly allegiances and the Kingdom?

**QUESTIONS**

In Matthew 4:8-10, Satan offers Jesus “all the kingdoms of the world.” What is the significance of this offer? What is the significance of Jesus’s refusal?

In the story of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19), Jesus said it is hard for a rich man to enter heaven. Why is that? Does that worry you?

When Pontius Pilate, a Roman official, asks the Jesus, the so-called King of the Jews what crime he’s to be executed for, Jesus replies, “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) What is it about the Kingdom of God that is so threatening?

Often times political power in the Bible is said to have been given by God (Daniel 2:37-38, John 19:11). How do we reconcile the idea of God appointing rulers and authorities while devoting ourselves only to the Kingdom?

**ACTION STEP**

Think about what it means to live solely allied to the Kingdom of God. Come back next week with one concrete step that you can take to make that journey.



## SMALL GROUP STUDIES

AUGUST 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:8

### WEEK TWO NOTES



**WEEK 3::AUGUST 22**

**GETTING DUNKED :: MARK 1:2-9**

**REPENT!!**

Does that make you think of a man on a soapbox, megaphone in hand, waving a signboard warning that “the END is NEAR”? Perhaps that’s an extreme version. What does this word mean to a non-believer? Someone who has been a Christian for years? A run-of-the-mill, middle-of-the-road kind of Joe?

The word literally means turn around, to change direction. It means, instead of going my way, being my own boss, living my life as I see fit, I yield to a different boss and Master. I forsake the sin -- and direction of sin -- which I used to embrace. Repentance does not happen with the attitude that says, “I’m a good enough Christian.” There has to be humility for a significant shift to say, “Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.”

A 40-ish woman received an e-mail that her then distant, 50-ish, scoffing, non-Christian brother was getting baptized 2,000 miles away. She did not recognize the liturgical language quoted in his formal baptism announcement; he was “rejecting the kingdom of Satan, and through the symbol of baptism, identifying with Christ in His death, resurrection and newness of life....” He had become a Christian, a Christ follower. It was real! Her reaction was shock and gratitude.

Much less dramatically, as a teen, that is what she had done -- rejected Satan’s kingdom when she began to trust Christ with her life. “Conversion” can be so awkward in that horrible high school way, but allegiance shifted. Identity began to change; and eventually a person’s private repentance, or turnaround, begins to have influence on a life lived in public. That is where the word baptism comes in; baptism into Christ is an internal reality that occurs at conversion. A piece of white cloth that is baptized or dunked into a vat of red dye is no longer identified as a white cloth. Whether dramatic or gradual, the change is real, through and through.

In our lives as Christ-followers, no matter how long we’ve identified ourselves that way, we try to follow Christ both privately and publicly. Repentance isn’t a one-time act; there’s also daily repentance. Once the boat has turned around and gotten on a different course, subtle adjustments still have to continually be made to stay that course. The optimistic baby Christian that hopes to be sinning less as he matures is faced with the reality that sin isn’t going away. Our dependence on Christ deepens.

“I wish you knew what it is to give your heart to Jesus to keep everyday. I used to try to keep my own heart right, but it would always be going wrong. So at last I had to give up trying myself, and to accept the Lord’s offer to keep it for me. Don’t you think that is the best way? Perhaps sometimes you think, ‘I will try not to be selfish or unkind or disobedient.’ And yet, though you really try, you do not succeed. But Jesus says: ‘You should trust that to Me. I would keep that heart, if you would trust Me with it.’ And He would, too.



“Once I used to try to think very much and very often about Jesus, but I often forgot Him. Now I trust Jesus to keep my heart remembering Him, and He does so. This is the best way. Pray God to make it plain to you, and to help you so to trust Jesus.

“He is our life, our strength, our salvation. He is our wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption. He is our power for service and fruit-bearing, and His bosom is our resting place now and forever.” (Hudson Taylor)

No megaphone, no soapbox; just daily choices to trust our lives to a really good Master.

#### RELATED VERSES

Galatians 2:20

Philippians 1:6

Philippians 2:13

#### DISCUSSION STARTERS

What has repentance meant to you personally?

#### QUESTIONS

What do you think Martin Luther meant when he said, “Love God and sin boldly”? Does a repentant person still struggle with sin? What might that look like?

Take a minute to discuss the story of Jacob’s wrestling with God (Gen 32). Wasn’t this a “turning point” in his life? Would God rather us spend our energy on “getting it together” *for* Him, or have us wrestle *with* Him -- fears, bad habits, manipulative agendas, and all -- and eventually marvel that He doesn’t destroy us in the process!?

Hebrews 12 talks about “throwing off everything that hinders and the sin which so easily entangles” as we follow Christ. What would be a step of repentance in the context of some subtle hinderances and entanglements in your life?

What role do good friends play in helping us stay on course?

#### ACTION STEP

Share with a friend this week how Christ has changed your life. Take some time to celebrate that “turnaround.” Then prayerfully consider an area of your life that may be troubling to you, asking God to illuminate pet sins and their underlying energy. Continue to celebrate God’s ability and desire to lovingly and patiently change our lives for the better, for Him and His purposes, as we walk daily **with** Him.



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

AUGUST 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:8

WEEK THREE NOTES

**WEEK 4::AUGUST 29  
INTO THE WILD :: MARK 1:9-13**

A story is not a story without the unknown. The unknown makes so many elements of a story possible. Unknowns build tension, set the pace, create ambiguity, and cause the reader to make leaps in thought. In a mystery novel, it is that which is unknown that pulls a reader from one clue to the next. In a horror or gothic novel, it is that which the reader doesn't know that makes the ghost/monster/demon truly horrifying (as soon as you explain the thing or bring it into the daylight, he is no longer frightening). In a drama, it is the unknowns that create excitement and tension—is the main character really going to wallow in his ineptitude and issues, or will he turn a new leaf and cause everything to turn out ok? Unknowns can also create a sense of awe and wonder. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy enters into the wardrobe and unknowingly passes into Narnia, the first thing she sees is a lamppost in the middle of a snowy forest. How did it get there? What is its meaning? We don't know, but we are struck by a sense of awe by such an enigmatic and mythical picture.

God has always been interested in this type of thing. As a grand story-maker, he creates all sorts of unknowns in the Bible—he sets up rather interesting situations where the main character does not know the outcome or reasoning behind God placing them in what appears to be dire straits. Jonah finds himself miraculously alive in the belly of a whale; but will he make it out, and for what ends? Joseph finds himself sold as a slave to Midianite merchants by his own brothers; could any good possibly come out of the situation? David finds himself anointed as king by God's command, but then he has to flee for his life into the desert to avoid Saul's wrath. Will he ever become a true king? Noah sends out a dove day by day, wondering if the flood God sent will ever recede enough to find dry land. Moses is sent into the desert with the fugitive Israelites, wondering where he will find food and water for all of them, let alone if they will make it to the Promised Land.

In each of these stories there seems to be a pattern: God makes himself known, gives some sort of sign or guidance or blessing, and then suddenly our main character is thrust into the wilderness where they don't know whether or not they can truly trust God.

This pattern repeats itself in Mark 1:9-13. Immediately after God makes himself known in a very profound way at Jesus' baptism, Jesus is sent by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted. Jesus may not have known what the purpose was. He just went, playing the role of having to go into the unknown like so many of God's sons and daughters before him. Perhaps this is counter to theology (wasn't Jesus, after all, God, and all-knowing?), but it is not counter to the patterns that God maps on his story-board. If Jesus knew the purpose, if he knew why he was suddenly in the desert, if he knew how long he was to be there or where his next meal would come from or what the exact responses were to be when Satan tempted him, where would the tension and the true testing for him be? Where would the story be without at least some unknowns?

And God, just like he did with his own son, wants to bring the unknown into our own stories.



**RELATED VERSES**

Mark 1:9-13  
Deuteronomy 8:1-5

**DISCUSSION STARTERS**

What is your favorite movie? What are the unknowns that make it so good?

**QUESTIONS**

Do you think God likes story? Is he interested in heroism? Why? If God knows all things, this would eliminate unknowns, so how could he enjoy truly story?

If God is fond of creating tension in lives—of allowing situations (or even creating them) where we as his people find ourselves in the midst of storms, not knowing what to do or how the outcome will turn out, then how do we reconcile that with God’s goodness?

Describe a point in your life where God worked in his story-telling pattern that Jesus encountered—you felt very strongly his call or leading, then were suddenly thrust into the desert. What was the outcome like?

It is easy to forget about the notion of temptation, as it is easy to forget about Satan himself. What is Satan’s goal for you as a person? Be specific.

Read Deuteronomy 8:1-5. This was Moses giving a speech to the Israelites just before they entered the Promised Land. What is the purpose of God taking us into the desert?

**ACTION STEP**

Invite God to create unknowns, wilderness, tension, problems, change and resolution in your life. If you are currently going through a wilderness time, acknowledge this to Him, and explain in detail how hard it is.



SMALL GROUP STUDIES

AUGUST 2010 | VOL:3 | NO:8

WEEK FOUR NOTES