

Mark 1:14-15

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/mark/mark-1/mark-114-15/>

Mark's terse statement, "Jesus came," is in effect a first-century press release with three points: the time is fulfilled; the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe. Jews needed to repent from believing Jesus was an illegitimate son of a carpenter from a backwater town, to believing He was the Messiah foretold by the prophets and announced by John the Baptizer. Gentiles needed to repent from believing Jesus was an erudite eccentric Jewish philosopher from a backwater country, to believing He was the savior of the world.

The parallel gospel accounts for this passage are Matthew 4:12-17; Luke 4:14-15.

Mark starts by telling us (almost as a side note) that *John had been taken into custody*. This gives us insight into the sequence of events—but no information about the context of John's arrest.

It appears *John* the Baptist was arrested twice. We are not told which arrest is being referred to. Matthew and Mark say *John* was *taken into custody* during *Jesus's* forty days in the wilderness, while the Gospel writer John says that the Baptizer was arrested sometime later after *Jesus's* ministry was in full swing, sometime after *Jesus's* secret meeting with Nicodemus. At that time *Jesus* began baptizing people in Judea while *John* was baptizing people in Aenon near Salim (John 3:22-23). (Aenon and Salim are located on the Jordan River approximately fifty miles north of the Dead Sea and forty miles south of Galilee.)

The first time *John* was arrested was likely by the religious leaders who did not like being called a "brood of vipers" by *John* (Matthew 3:7). These religious leaders probably took *John* into *custody*, interrogated him, and then let him go, a pattern observed in other biblical stories. *John* for his part moved further north out of Judea (and closer to Herod Antipas's jurisdiction in Galilee) where he continued to preach repentance and of *God's* coming *kingdom*. *John* the Baptizer would later be arrested a second time, this time by Herod Antipas who would reluctantly have him executed. Given that Mark is describing *Jesus's* initial choice for His ministry headquarters, it seems more likely he is referring to *John's* first arrest. We learn the details of the second arrest in Matthew 14:3-12 and Mark 6:17-29.

Neither Mark nor Matthew (Matthew 4:12) tell us who arrested *John*, only that as a result of *John's* imprisonment, *Jesus* withdrew into *Galilee* to conduct His early ministry away from the lion's den of the Sadducees in Judea.

Mark uses *Now* indicating that what happened next occurred sometime after *Jesus's* temptation by the devil in the wilderness and His being ministered to by angels (Mark 1:12-13). This is similar to Matthew's use of "Now when" (Matthew 4:12) to signal a break in the narrative. The events captured by the Gospel writer John in John 2:13–4:45 suggest *Jesus* had a ministry in Judea during the narrative break in Matthew and Mark's gospels. It seems that there was little known fruit from His time in Judea. It may be that the one disciple from the twelve that *Jesus* picked up from His early Judean ministry was Judas Iscariot. Iscariot means "of Kerioth."

Keirioth was a town located in the far south of Judea, approximately 25 miles south of Jerusalem and 10 miles west of the Dead Sea. (See Map).

According to Matthew, *Jesus* came and settled in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the northern shoreline by the sea of *Galilee* (Matthew 4:12-3). This region is in the ancient tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali among the northern borders of Israel.

Matthew provides additional insight not included by Mark by citing an Old Testament scripture and explaining how it is a direct fulfillment of Messianic prophecy (Matthew 4:14-16).

Matthew quotes from the prophet Isaiah,

“But there will be no more gloom for her who was in anguish; in earlier times He treated the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali with contempt, but later on He shall make it glorious, by the way of the sea, on the other side of Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles.

The people who walk in darkness
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them.”
(Isaiah 9:1-2)

Isaiah’s prophecy was given to the Kingdom of Judah, foretelling the Assyrian invasion of Israel and Judah from the north. The border regions of Zebulun and Naphtali would take the brunt of this invading force. The “gloom,” “anguish,” “contempt,” and “darkness” from this invasion was fulfilled within the prophet’s lifetime. But the “later on” dawning glory and great light is the future presence of the Messiah who would begin and base His ministry in these same regions.

Matthew’s citation slightly modifies the Isaiah text, “The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali” (Matthew 4:15a) refer to the territory around *Galilee*. Zebulun and Naphtali are two of the twelve tribes of Israel, and had specific borders appointed during the time of Joshua (Joshua 19:10-16; 32-39). “By the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, *Galilee*” (Matthew 4:15b) echoes this reference. “Beyond the Jordan” here more so implies “above” or “north” of the Jordan rather than our more common usage which means “across.” The phrase of “the Gentiles” is added to signal the occupying invaders. “The people who were sitting in darkness” (Matthew 4:16a) refers to those living in or from that invaded region. The Messiah’s public ministry in this region is captured by the fact that “they saw a great Light” (Matthew 4:16a). This theme is repeated: “And those who were sitting in the land and shadow of death, Upon them a Light dawned” (Matthew 4:16b). An extra nuance is added by “Upon them a Light dawned.” The use of “dawned” hints that the Messiah’s public ministry will begin here. The town where Matthew tells us that *Jesus* begins His public ministry is Capernaum. It was a Jewish fishing village located in the *Galilee* region Isaiah foretold seven centuries earlier.

Mark continues by reporting that *Jesus* returns to *Galilee* (away from unbelieving Jerusalem) and begins His public *preaching* ministry in *Galilee*, which will last for about a year and a half. *Jesus* was *preaching the gospel of God*. The Greek word [εὐαγγέλιον](#) (g2098 - pronounced: “yoo-ang-

ghel'-ee-on”) is translated as *gospel*. It means “good news.” In *Jesus*’s time, to His immediately present Jewish audience, the Good News was the arrival of God's reign. For Mark's later Gentile audience, the Good News was *Jesus*’s death, resurrection, ascension, and promised return (Mark 15:1-16:8). The important idea to grasp is all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, need God's forgiveness through faith in *Jesus*.

Mark’s terse statement, *Jesus came*, is in effect a first-century press release with three bullet points:

1. *The time is fulfilled*
2. *The kingdom of God is at hand*
3. *Repent and believe*

The Time Is Fulfilled

Jesus announces *the time is fulfilled*. He is proclaiming that the One John said would come (Mark 1:7) has *now* appeared! The *time* is a decisive and critical moment in history.

This time refers to that moment the prophets foretold when the Messiah would appear and inaugurate *the kingdom of God*. Here are two examples of many that foretold this:

“And it will be said in that day,
‘Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that He might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
Let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.’”
(Isaiah 25:9)

“One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations and men of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed.”
(Daniel 7:13-14)

“And the LORD will be king over all the earth; in that day the LORD will be the only one, and His name the only one.”
(Zechariah 14:9)

This is the “fullness of time” referred to by the Apostle Paul when writing to the Galatians:

“But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.”
(Galatians 4:4-5)

When *Jesus* first *came*, He *came* to offer this *kingdom* to the Jews. This is what He meant when He said, *the kingdom of God is at hand*. And it seems He would have done so, had they received Him as their Messiah. But they rejected Him (Matthew 27:22; John 1:11) and His *kingdom* (John 19:14-15).

Jesus will come again, and when He does, He will establish His *kingdom* then.

The Kingdom of God is at Hand

Jesus explained what He meant when He was *saying*: “*The time is fulfilled*” with the next expression: “*and the kingdom of God is at hand*.” *The time was fulfilled* because *the kingdom of God was at hand*. And *the kingdom of God was at hand* because the King (*Jesus*) had arrived.

When *Jesus* first *came* to earth as a man, He *came* to offer this long-prophesied *kingdom of God* to the Jews. It seems He would have inaugurated *the kingdom of God*, had they received Him as their Messiah. This was how the disciples understood *Jesus*’s message. Throughout *Jesus*’s ministry, up until His ascension into heaven, they believed that *the kingdom*’s coming was imminent (Luke 19:11; Acts 1:6).

Even after His ascension and the Holy Spirit’s coming at Pentecost, Peter called on the Jews to repent of their rejection of *Jesus* “in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send *Jesus*, the Christ appointed for you” (Acts 3:19-20). In other words, Peter made the claim that if the Jews of *Jesus*’s generation repented of their rejection of *Jesus* as the Messiah, *God* would accept this and then immediately inaugurate *the kingdom of God*.

But they rejected Him (John 1:11) and His *kingdom* (John 19:14-15). They rejected Him both before He was resurrected, as well as after. Therefore, He ascended to heaven, and awaits until the “fullness of the Gentiles” has been completed (Romans 11:25) at which time He will return to earth.

Jesus will return to earth again, this time as a conqueror (Revelation 19:11-17). And when He does, He will physically install *the kingdom of God* on the earth at that time (Matthew 25:31, 34).

A Comparison of the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven

Observant readers of this passage and its Matthew parallel may notice that Mark (under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit) records *Jesus* using the phrase *kingdom of God* while

Matthew (under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit) used the phrase: “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 4:17).

It follows that these terms are functionally synonymous. Both expressions refer to the divine and Messianic authority of Jesus that was foretold by the prophets. *The kingdom of heaven* and *the kingdom of God* each share the core promise that the Lord will establish a physical, political government upon the earth with Himself and/or His Messiah as its King. This *kingdom* will eternally prosper under His administration of divine laws.

Moreover, many of the teachings and parables Matthew records *Jesus saying* about *the kingdom of heaven* are also said by *Jesus* about *the kingdom of God* in Mark and Luke’s narratives. This verse is one example (Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:15). A few other examples where “kingdom of heaven” is used in Matthew while Mark uses *kingdom of God* follow:

- The Disciples were granted to understand Mysteries of *the kingdom* (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11, and Luke 8:10)
- Jesus explained *the kingdom* in the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:24; Mark 4:26)
- Jesus explained *the kingdom* in the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Matthew 13:31; Mark 4:30, and Luke 13:18)
- *The kingdom of heaven* belongs to children (Matthew 19:14; Mark 10:15, and Luke 18:17)
- Entering *the kingdom* as a child (Matthew 19:23; Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:24)

But even though these passages functionally describe the same prophetic reality, have similar usages, and share the same core meaning, the *kingdom of God* had different cultural connotations from “the kingdom of heaven.” These different cultural connotations are subtle but important. The respective terms were most likely chosen and implemented based upon the author’s intended audience.

Matthew, whose primary readers were Jews, chose the term “kingdom of heaven” because it was more appealing to the Jewish sensibilities. Mark, Luke, (and even John) may have used the term *kingdom of God* because it was more relatable to the Gentiles, who were their primary readers.

There are three ways each term conveyed the same core meaning, but did so more effectively to each culture.

The first reason for the cultural difference relates to how Jews and Gentiles speak of *God*. Jews revere God’s name and are not inclined to speak directly of God. The term “kingdom of heaven” is less direct than *kingdom of God*, and is therefore more agreeable to Jewish sensibilities. Gentiles expected to speak directly of *God*.

An additional reason *kingdom of God* may have been more appealing than “kingdom of heaven” to Mark’s Roman and Luke’s Greek audiences is because in Greek and Roman minds, the term, *God*, was a more familiar, and more specific term than *heaven*. The Gentiles had many gods. This phrase the *kingdom of God* (singular) reflected a claim that *God* is the One True *God*, and was therefore over all other gods. The phrase “kingdom of heaven” could have been heard by Gentiles to include the many pagan gods that dwelt in the heaven of the Greco-Roman pantheon.

Additionally, in the Greco-Roman pantheon, heaven was accessible to humans. By using the term *kingdom of God*, the message being communicated to the Gentile audience is that *Jesus*’s ministry and salvation extends down from heaven and onto earth. It extends beyond the Jewish nation to everyone!

The third and related cultural difference between the phrase “kingdom of heaven” (Matthew) and *kingdom of God* (Mark) seems to be the lens with which the dominion of the *kingdom* is viewed.

The “kingdom of heaven” focuses on *God*’s rule over the earth. We get a sense of this meaning in *Jesus*’s prayer to His Father in heaven, that:

“Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.”
(Matthew 6:10)

This phrase makes it clear that “heaven” is a place where *God*’s will is done. It is a prayer for *God*’s authority to become as apparent on earth as it is in heaven.

As a quick aside, the Gospels were written in the Greek language. *Jesus* most likely spoke to His Jewish audience in some form of Aramaic, which was the common tongue of Judea in the first century. Therefore, the Gospel writers would have translated *Jesus*’s words into Greek, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Although, it seems likely that Matthew’s gospel was originally written and circulated in Aramaic, and later translated to Greek.

The Spirit inspired Matthew to translate *Jesus*’s expression as “kingdom of heaven” and Mark and Luke to translate *Jesus*’s same expression as *kingdom of God* to their respective audiences.

To learn more about this, see the Bible Says article: “[The Four Languages of Jesus’s Judea.](#)”

Repent and Believe

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

The message that Mark records *Jesus* saying is very similar to the message Matthew recorded both *Jesus* and *John* the Baptizer preaching in Matthew’s gospel (Matthew 3:2; Matthew 4:17).

The main difference between these two records is that Matthew's gospel omits the command to *believe in the gospel*, while both accounts include the command to *repent*. Before we comment on this difference, we will first look at what it means to *repent* and to *believe in the gospel*.

Repent literally means to change your mind. It comes from the Greek word, μετανοέω (G3340 - pronounced: "met-an-o-eh'-o"). In the New Testament, that change of mind is always for the better. It means to change your old (false) perspective about reality to *God's* (true) perspective of reality.

A change of mind is evidenced by a change of behavior.

Believe means to accept something as true; or to trust it, and/or put faith in it. This word comes from the Greek word, πιστεύω (G4102—pronounced: "pist-yoo'-o"). The author of Hebrews defines πίστις (G4102—pronounced "pis'-tis") the noun for faith/belief as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1).

To *believe in Jesus* as the Christ, the Son of *God*, is often cited in scripture as the sole requirement to accept the Gift of Eternal Life (John 1:12, 3:14-16; Ephesians 2:8-9). To believe in *Jesus* gains us salvation from the penalty of sin (Romans 5:9). When we *believe*, we are born of the Spirit, and placed into *God's* family (John 3:5-8). When we *believe*, we receive the Gift of Eternal Life, a gift that can neither be earned nor lost (Romans 11:29).

But the Bible also persistently tells believers to continually trust *God* no matter the circumstance, and to have faith in His promises (Romans 1:17; 2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:1-12:3; 1 Peter 1:6-7). Although we are saved from the penalty of sin, once and for all, when we *believe*, we need to continually walk in faith to be delivered from the adverse effects of the power of sin, in our daily lives (Galatians 6:8).

Jesus declares us righteous in the sight of *God* when we *believe*; we are justified before *God* solely as a matter of faith (Romans 4:2-4). But in order to walk in the experience of righteousness requires that we walk by faith in our daily lives (Romans 1:16-17).

Now that we've commented on what *repent* and *believe* respectively mean, we can return to our question: Why does Matthew only record *Jesus* as issuing the directive to *repent*, while Mark records *Jesus* as issuing two directives, both to: 1.) *repent* and 2.) *believe the gospel*?

The expression: *to believe in the gospel* can be viewed both as an invitation to *believe* the good news that *Jesus* is *God* and to receive the free gift of eternal life, as well as an invitation to embrace the good news that *the kingdom* has arrived, and to then live according to its life-giving principles. Why then does Matthew only include one of the two invitations?

One reason could be because Matthew's gospel was written primarily to Jews. Likewise, *Jesus's* message was primarily to Jews. The Jews, who were the audience for Matthew and *Jesus*, had already believed in *God*, accepted His word as true, and believed that *God* would send a Messiah to inaugurate *the kingdom of God*. They already believed. But their mindset, or perspective, did not line up with *God's*.

Because Jews already believed in *God* and the Messiah, they only needed to *repent* of their ways and begin living according to the *kingdom* principles that *Jesus* the Messiah taught them (Matthew 5:1-7:29) in order to participate in the Messianic *kingdom*. They already believed, now they needed to see reality in truth, and align their thinking with the truth (John 8:31-32).

Baptism was a major way for Jews to show that they had repented and were now followers of *Jesus* as the Messiah (Acts 2:38). Matthew did not include *Jesus*'s directive to *believe in the gospel* because it was unnecessary for his Jewish audience who already believed *in this gospel*.

Mark, on the other hand, was writing to Gentiles, who needed first to *believe in the gospel* that *God* had come to earth as the man *Jesus*, to redeem and save the world. This would give them new life, and make them a new creation in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Then, in order to experience the life they had been given, they also needed to *repent* of their pagan ways of exploitation, and begin living according to *Jesus*'s teachings of love toward others. To love and serve others is to enter *the kingdom*.

Therefore, it is a reasonable postulation that Matthew did not include *believe* while Mark did include *believe* because Matthew's audience group (the Jews) already believed *in the gospel* that *God* would send a Messiah, while Mark's audience group (the Gentiles) had not yet believed *in the gospel*.

But both groups needed to *repent*. To *repent* is to adopt the same mindset as *Jesus*, and gain the same rewards that He gained (Philippians 2:5-11).

The reason the people of Israel needed to urgently *repent* was because a radically new political order, *the kingdom of God*, was about to be installed. *The kingdom of God* was *at hand*. The King had arrived. The values of this *kingdom* were going to be very different than the values of earthly kingdoms, such as Rome or the politics of Jewish factions. The Roman way was to gain power and authority in order to force coercive rule on others. *Jesus*'s *kingdom* elevated love and service to others.

When asked if He was King of the Jews, *Jesus* replied to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm" (John 18:36). *The kingdom of God* transcended all the kingdoms of men. The spiritual *kingdom of God* shines a light in the darkness of earth when His people live according to His precepts.

The Gentiles were not the main focus of *Jesus*'s earthly ministry (Matthew 15:24). However, the gospel was always intended to spread to and bless all the peoples of the earth (Genesis 12:3). Belief in *Jesus* granted them the Gift of eternal life, and this made them part of *God*'s eternal family (John 1:12; John 3:16). Repentance—changing their perspective and behavior to align with *God*'s teachings—granted them access to experience life in *God*'s *kingdom* (Matthew 7:21; 8:5-12).

Biblical Text

¹⁴ Now after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”