



## Mark: Crown and Cross

### Study 1 - Conflict and Kingship - Mark 2:1-3:6

#### Introduction

One of the best movies of the last 15 years would have to be the Ridley Scott epic, *Gladiator*. I'm sure most of you have seen it. So here is your spoiler alert – I'm going to talk about what happens. My guess that if haven't seen it in the last 15 years – you're probably not going to.

At the start of the film, the aging Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius has a private conversation with Maximus, his most trusted and successful military commander.

During the conversation, the Emperor tells Maximus that he wants him to succeed him as the new Emperor instead of the Emperor's evil son, Commodus.

Shortly after this conversation, Marcus Aurelius privately gives Commodus the same information. But the ambitious Commodus doesn't react well to the news. He quickly murders his father, thus securing the throne before anyone else learned of his father's plans for Maximus. He then gives the order that Maximus and his family be killed.

Maximus escapes and rushes off to save his family. But he doesn't make it. He finds them murdered and his beautiful home destroyed. He loses his desire to live; he is gathered up by a slave trader and sold as a gladiator. But after experiencing success as a gladiator – and learning of the potential to fight in the Roman coliseum before Emperor Commodus – Maximus has renewed hope . . . and vengeance.

The climactic moment of the movie occurs after the evil Emperor Commodus - has witnessed this masked gladiator's spectacular performance. So accompanied by his guards, walks out onto the floor of a packed coliseum to meet him. This is dialogue that then transpires:

Commodus: "Why doesn't the hero reveal himself and tell us all your real name. You do have a name."

Maximus: "My name is gladiator."

Commodus: "How dare you turn your back on me! Slave! You will remove your helmet and tell me your name!"

Maximus: "My name is Maximus Desimus Meridius, commander of the armies of the north, general of the fearless legions, loyal servant of the true emperor – Marcus Aurelius, father to a murdered son, husband to a murdered wife, and I will have my vengeance in this life or the next!"

A very powerful scene. But the interesting thing is seeing Commodus be offended by the gladiator's audacity to turn his back on him. He wondered, "Who does this guy think he is? Does he have a right to do such a thing?" But after Maximus reveals himself and everyone in the coliseum responds, they all come to realize who this man is, and that he does have the right to do such a thing.

Today we find ourselves in Mark chapter 2 – and our story today is set about 120 years before Gladiator. And we find today a section of Mark's Gospel where in story after story after story after story – 5 stories in fact – the same question comes up again and again. But not about Maximus – but about Jesus. Who does this man think he is?

And that is what holds these 5 stories together. They are all here in one package actually – a package that runs from chapter 2 all the way through to include the first part of chapter 3. And in each story – the question is asked about Jesus – 'who does this guy think he is?' and what that produces – is conflict. So these five stories have come to be known as the conflict stories – for it's in every one. Let me quickly show you.

Story 1, chapter 2:6 "Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Story 2, chapter 2:16 "When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

Story 3, chapter 2:18 "Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"

Story 4, Chapter 2:24 “The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?”

Story 5, Chapter 3:6 “Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.”

And the reason this conflict is here, and the reason this question of ‘who does this man think he is’ hangs over every story is because of the audacity of Jesus. In story after story, situation after situation Jesus acts and speaks like no-one else. And here is the key, that helps us unlock the whole thing. I’m going to tell you what it is upfront, and then we’re going to see it unfold together. *Jesus acts like he thinks he is some sort of King.* And we see this in each of the five stories.

Jesus acts like he thinks he is some sort of King. In fact – Jesus think that he is the Messiah. Now you might have heard that word, and not quite got your heads around what it means. Messiah means Christ. You have heard of that, right – Jesus Christ. Now perhaps you thought that was Jesus surname, like Jesus Christ was born of Mary Christ, and Joseph Christ from Nazareth. It is not that at all. The word Christ is a title. It is a title that tells you who someone is. We all say Queen Elizabeth. To put it in the way the bible speaks – it is Elizabeth Queen. Or Peter, minister, or Michael, engineer, or Sarah accountant. Or Jesus. Christ.

And the word Messiah means Christ. It is the identical word in a different language. In Hebrew Messiah is in Greek Christ. Same thing.

Fine. Good. But what on earth does it mean? So here is what it means. The word Messiah or Christ was the title given to a King or a Priest who had been anointed by God. A King or a Priest who God himself had put his seal, his approval, his spirit upon – for a particular task. We see this in 1 Samuel 26:9 where David is speaking about King Saul “But David said to Abishai, “Don't destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?”

But then, towards the end of the OT, after the exile of Israel, the expectation around this messiah or Christ person starts to shift. So Israel have been blasted out of their land - and this anointed King, this Messiah starts to take on a much bigger role in what Jews thought God would do in the future.

This is how the NT scholar Larry Hurtado puts it ‘Out of this hope...Jews came to use *Masih* (and the Greek equivalent *Christos*) as a designation for a future agent (“Messiah”) to be sent by God, usually to restore Israel’s independence and righteousness.’

Israel are defeated. They are awaiting a King to save them. And it seems that Jesus might just think that he is this King. But here is the thing. It is not just *Jesus* who thinks that he is the Messiah – so does Mark, the guy who wrote this Gospel. How do we know that? Look at chapter 1 verse 1. Mark could not be more explicit. If something is important – you put it up front. And Mark puts it in his very first sentence: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God”.

Ok. But the Messiah needs to be an anointed King right? Someone upon whom God has put his seal, his approval, his spirit upon? Look at Mark 1:9 “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

And it all starts to come together. Who does this guy think he is? He thinks he is the Messiah, the Christ, God’s anointed King who has come to restore Israel’s glory and righteousness.

Jesus acts like he thinks he is some sort of King. Not any sort – but a particular sort. The Messiah. And now, in five stories we start to see what Jesus thinks the Messiah King does. We are going to get an insight here into this King, and what he thinks his Kingdom will look like. We’re going to spend 2 minutes – only 2 minutes on each of the five stories.

### **Story 1**

We have a paralytic on a mat brought to Jesus for healing. It’s a great story – the roof is torn off, the man is lowered in, such is the desperation and the faith of the man’s friends. Jesus sees the man, sees his desperate situation and says to him ‘your sins are forgiven’. Which is totally weird, and almost everyone would have thought to themselves ‘Hey Jesus, you’ve missed the mark on this one. It’s not his sins; it’s the legs’.

Almost everyone. But not the Pharisees. Because in verse 6 we were told that they are thinking “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?”

And they are right. Jesus here speaks and acts, as only God can. You see, if you hurt me, and then you come to me and ask me to forgive you, I can say to you ‘I forgive you’. I can forgive you when you sin against me. But I can never say to you – I forgive you for all you have ever done. Why not? Only the aggrieved party can do that! Only God can do that. And Jesus says that. He is claiming to be God.

So Jesus knows that that is what they are thinking. And so he says - verse 9 “Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up, take your mat and walk’?

But it doesn't matter – for then Jesus does both. He forgives the man, and he heals his legs. Verse 11. “I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home.” And he does.

You know in Psalm 103, there is a picture of what God is like, and what his Messiah King will come to do. It is a prophecy. This is what it says “Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits - who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases”

Who does Jesus think he is? He is the King of Forgiveness.

## Story 2

In story 2 Jesus walks past a customs booth maned by a guy named Levi. When you travelled from one political jurisdiction to another, you would pay a departure tax, a bit like you might at the airport. Levi was this guy. The airport tax collector.

And the Jew of first century Palestine viewed the tax collector with the same hatred that the Iraqi militia leader viewed their country men who took on jobs as interpreters for the Americans during the Iraq War. They were seen as despicable traitors actively aiding the oppression of their own people, and getting fat and rich in the process. Their neighbours hated them. They were cut off from the formal religious life of Israel. They were treated as apostates. And they were far, far from God. That is who Levi is.

And Jesus walks by his work place and says – verse 14 ‘Follow me’. And Levi does. The next thing we see is that Jesus is eating dinner at Levi’s house, with a bunch of other Levi’s. Other tax collectors. Other sinners. Other prostitutes. Other traitors. The dirty. The rotten. The scoundrels.

And the religious leaders are stunned. So they ask Jesus’ disciples ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ They are asking – ‘who does this guy think he is?’ And Jesus overhears them, and he answers in verse 17 ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’

You know in Ezekiel 34, there is a picture painted of who God will come back for, when he sends his King. And it is not who you think. Listen to this

'For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep...I will search

for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy.'

Who does Jesus think he is? He is the King of the outcast, the broken, the sick and the weak.

### **Story 3**

In story 3, the topic shifts to fasting; to not eating. And at the time it was customary for faithful Jews to fast twice a week. And we read in verse 18 that John's disciples are fasting, and so are the Pharisee's. But Jesus disciples were not. So they ask Jesus 'why are your disciples not fasting?'

Here is something to keep in mind. At this time, fasting was something that Jews would do to hasten the coming of the Messiah, and his Kingdom. And failure to fast would have been seen as treachery to God; a hindering of the coming of the Messiah and the redemption of Israel, which all Jews were waiting for.

And then Jesus explains why his disciples are not fasting. He says in verse 19 "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them?" essentially, he is saying 'who goes to a wedding and doesn't eat?' which sounds cryptic. Until you realise that in the Old Testament God has likened himself to a groom, and he has likened Israel to a bride (Isaiah 62:5), and now Jesus is saying the very same thing. Essentially - Jesus is saying there is no need to fast to speed on the coming of the Messiah - the messiah is here. And now is not the time for fasting, but feasting. Now is the time for the wedding banquet.

You know, in Isaiah 25, there is a picture painted of the time when God is with his people. And life will be so full, and wonderful and meaningful - it will be like a banquet. You know that sense of love and joy and fun and fulfilment you get at Christmas dinner? Or a wedding when you're at a good table? That is a taste of what it will be like when God sends his King to be with his people.

This is what Isaiah 25:6-8: "On this mountain The LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine - the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Who does Jesus think he is? He is the King of the banquet.

### **Story 4 and 5**

Stories 4 and 5 we're going to treat together, because the same issue, the same conflict, and the same Kingship is on display. They both have to do with specific elements of the Judaic Law.

And one of the key aspects of the Jewish law was the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a very important day for Jews – it was a day when you could not work; you had to rest. And the idea was that as you rested, you would remember God’s acts of creating his people, and God’s act of saving his people. And – again – Sabbath observance was seen as crucial condition for the appearance of the Messiah – Israel’s long awaited King.

Now story 4 has Jesus walking through a cornfield, and his disciples picking some corn by hand, on the Sabbath. Absolutely a no-no. And the Pharisees say to Jesus ‘your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath’, and Jesus replies by telling a story where King David – Israel’s greatest King – also did the same.

And he is saying to the Pharisees ‘you are stricter in your legal demands upon people than Israel’s greatest King ever was’. And then he says something shocking – he says ‘the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’. What Jesus says here is look – the Sabbath was given to God’s people as a help and a provision, to care for them, so that they would flourish in life. But you have turned it into a burden.

And then in story 5, the same thing happens. This time not with food, but with a healing. And again – the same issue is on display. The Pharisees believed that healing a man with a shrivelled hand constituted work, and work could not be done on the Sabbath.

But the Pharisee’s motives are on display – we read in verse 2 they watched him so they might accuse him; and when Jesus asks them ‘is it lawful to do harm or good on the Sabbath, to save life or kill’? They are silent. And their silence indicts them. For all their learning, they do not know God, and they do not know God’s law. The man had a shrivelled hand, but the Pharisees have shrivelled hearts towards God and man.

You know, in the Old Testament, in Amos chapter 5, there is a picture painted of what it will be like for those Israelites who love the law, over and above God’s King; and it isn’t pretty. This is what it says: “Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him....I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Who does this Jesus think he is? He is the king who hates religiosity, and loves compassion. He is the King of the law.

## Conclusion

I know today's sermon has been a 5 course meal. There is so much in these 5 stories, and each one deserved a sermon on its own. But to do so we would have lost what Mark was trying to show us in them all. And that is who Jesus *really* is.

And here is the answer. Jesus is God's anointed and promised King – the Messiah, the Christ – who comes to rule and lead in a way like no other. He is the King of forgiveness; he is the King of the outcast; he is the king of the banquet and he is the King of the law. And the conflict rises. Murder is now on the Pharisees and Herodian's mind and lips. I wonder if that was allowed on the Sabbath?

No, in Jesus, this new King is on full display.

And I want to finish by showing you one more thing.

Can you look at chapter 3 verse 5. See what it says? "Jesus looked around at the Pharisee's in anger". In anger.

Who is this King? This King, this Messiah, this Christ, this Jesus is one who is angered by sin and rebellion. This is not gentle Jesus meek and mild. He will rage against the sin of his creation.

Notice the next 6 words – and "deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts".

Who is this King? This King was one who was deeply grieved – his heart was broken by the sin of his creation.

And if you know how the story goes – you know that he will do something – something profoundly remarkable – about it. This King will die, to take away the sin of the world; even for the ones here who are plotting to kill him.

You cannot put this King in a box. He defies any attempt to contain him. Today we'll let the scholar NT Wright have the last word:

"How can you live with the terrifying thought that the hurricane has become human, that the fire has become flesh, that life itself came to life and walked in our midst? Christianity either means that, or it means nothing. It is either the most devastating disclosure of the deepest reality in the world, or it's a



sham, a nonsense, a bit of deceitful play-acting. Most of us, unable to cope with saying either of those things, condemn ourselves to live in the shallow world in between...”

Who does this man think he is? He thinks he is God himself. Who do you think he is?