

Mark 1:14-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Mark chapter 1 verses 14 to 20. Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God and saying, The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

Repent and believe in the gospel. Passing alongside the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew the brother of Simon casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. And Jesus said to them, Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him. In Mark chapter 1, Jesus begins his Galilean ministry, which takes up the first eight chapters of the book. While John the Baptist had carried out much of his ministry in Judea, Jesus starts off as a Galilean figure. Jesus' message concerns the gospel of God, the good news that God is coming to reign. The long-awaited time has come at last. God's promised reign is about to arrive, and people must repent and believe the joyful tidings. Like John before him, Jesus is described as one proclaiming. He is a herald bearing a message of something about to happen in history. Unlike John, however, he isn't just a forerunner, but the one announcing and bringing the expected rule of God. God is now fulfilling his purpose in their days, and they must be ready, repenting of their sins as a people and responding faithfully to the proclamation being given to them. Jesus passes alongside the Sea of Galilee and calls Simon and Andrew, followed by James and John. These are the three core disciples, with Andrew being the fourth disciple in the typical ordering. They are all fishermen from the north of the country, not the most promising material with which to start a religious movement. They are beside the Sea of Galilee, and the Sea of Galilee is very important in Matthew, Mark and John in particular. Luke speaks about it as the Lake of Gennesaret, and then later on talks about a sea in the book of Acts, in the case of the Mediterranean. But in the other Gospels, the Sea of Galilee is very important both within the narrative and also symbolically. The Sea of Galilee is a focal point for Jesus' ministry, a point in terms of which the nature of his ministry ought to be understood. However, we never read of Jesus visiting Sepphoris or Tiberias, which were the main Hellenistic cities in the region. Jesus' ministry, although in a region with lots of Gentile and Hellenized populations, is overwhelmingly a ministry to Jews. Simon and Andrew are both Greek names, which suggest perhaps that like other Jews in the area, they had some Hellenistic influences. Simon is connected to the Hebrew name Simeon, though.

They are called to be fishers of men. Gentiles could be compared to fish, dwelling in the Sea of the Gentiles. In Jeremiah chapter 16 verse 16, there is already the imagery of a fisher of men. Behold, I am sending for many fishers, declares the Lord, and they shall catch them, and afterward I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them from every mountain and every hill, and out of the clefts of the rocks. Jesus calls his disciples much as Elijah calls Elisha in 1 Kings chapter 19 verses 19 to 21, and also while they are engaged in a symbolically important task. 1 Kings describes Elijah's calling of Elisha as follows. So he departed from there and found Elisha the son of Shaphat, who was ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen in front of him, and he was with the twelve. Elijah passed by him and cast his cloak upon him. And he left the oxen and ran after Elijah and said, Let me kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow you. And he said to him, Go back again, for what have I done to you? And he returned from following him and took the yoke of oxen and sacrificed them and boiled their flesh with the yokes of the oxen and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and went after Elijah and assisted him. Jesus calls his disciples less as a rabbi would and more as a prophet would. He calls them while they are engaged in their day-to-day tasks, but in tasks that are significant and meaningful. Elisha was called when he had twelve yoke of oxen, representing Israel.

[4 : 17] Peter, Andrew, James and John are called while they are fishing, in order that they might become fishers of men. They must, like Elijah, make a complete break with their past life, but their initial vocation must also be transposed into something different, into a spiritual vocation to serve the kingdom of God. Is there symbolic importance in the difference between the tasks that the brothers are engaged in? Perhaps. Maybe Peter and Andrew's work of casting the net suggests that Peter will be the one who leads a mission, whereas in the case of James and John, who are mending the nets, it might suggest that they will lead in doctrine and in oversight of the church, perhaps. This, however, is not something I'd put a great deal of weight upon. We should continue to hear the recurring word immediately in these accounts. Things are happening very quickly, and it isn't just Jesus himself who does things immediately, but the called disciples in response to his word. It is possible that Mark's liking for the term immediately, especially in this chapter, plays off the quotation in verse 3 of the chapter. Some translations capture something of the connection between the word immediately and the make his path straight quotation by using straight way for immediately. John's gospel suggests that these men weren't unknown to Jesus, but were formerly disciples of John, and that they had already been acquainted with him through John's witness.

This would make sense of their response when he calls them. Also, comparing the references to women at the cross, it seems that James and John were most likely Jesus' cousins. The disciples were a very tight-knit group, and it seems that many of them were known to each other or related to each other in some way before they were brought together as a band. Finally, the reference to their leaving their father behind may also be more than just a bare reporting of what happened. Rather, it serves to underline something about the character of discipleship, and perhaps its greater urgency relative to that of Elijah and Elisha. A question to consider. Of the three core disciples, Peter, James and John, James is the one that we hear the least about. He's paired with John as one of the sons of thunder, and he's with Peter and John on key occasions, such as the raising of Jairus' daughter, the Mount of Transfiguration, and the Garden of Gethsemane. However, he is definitely the third of the group. Apart from the account of his death, he is never really spoken of apart from an association with his more famous brother. What more can we learn about James as a character as we look through the New Testament?