

THE GOSPEL OF MARK
Introduction

By
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As a writer, John Mark would feel very much at home in the fictional story books of today. His use of words, direct style, and storytelling ability are appealing to modern readers. The words seem to tumble from Mark's pen as if he could hardly wait to get the story down. His use of "straightway" and "immediately" almost thirty times indicates his sense of urgency. His meticulous attention to details, especially those expressing the feelings and attitudes of Jesus, give us insights at times that are not available in the other three gospels.

While the Gospel of Mark has its own particular identity, it is of great importance to us, as students of God's Word, because it is generally considered to be the first Gospel to be written and the first eyewitness account of the actions and words of Jesus. We are not able to pinpoint the actual time of writing, but many leading authorities believe it was sometime after A.D. 50 and before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, possible around A.D. 65-67.

And in putting together this first eyewitness account of the drama of Jesus' words and actions, Mark had a peculiar advantage. As the son of Mary, a prominent early Christian who lived in Jerusalem, he had the opportunity of intimate fellowship with many of Jesus' followers. Then he is mentioned briefly with Paul and Barnabas, his cousin, on the first missionary journey. But it was on that trip that Mark incurred Paul's displeasure by leaving them early and returning home.

Mark's name surface again as Paul and Barnabas plan their second missionary journey. Barnabas wanted to take Mark along, but Paul was adamant in not agreeing to it, so they split up—Paul going one way with Silas while Barnabas and Mark went another way. We get word later though, that the rift between Paul and Mark was healed. In Colossians 4 Paul writes that Mark "sister's son to Barnabas" was with him, and later, Paul tells Timothy that "***Only Luke is with me. Take Mark and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry***" (2 Tim. 4:11).

In writing his eyewitness account Mark also had the advantage of an intimate relationship with the Apostle Peter. The earliest Christians believed that Peter shared his vivid recollections of all Jesus said and did with Mark who then recorded them care-

fully in his Gospel. We get a clue as to the close relationship between the two men when Peter refers to him as **“my son” (2 Peter 5:13)**.

It seems that Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome, and it conveyed a positive message of hope to Christians there and across the world who daily faced imprisonment and death because of their faith in Christ. He wanted them to be able to walk in the footsteps of Jesus throughout the three and one-half years of His ministry, to be present at His death and resurrection and then experience the presence of the Lord as their companion in trial and suffering.

At the same time, Mark makes it clear for those of us who wrestle with our hopes and fears in the drama of life over 1900 years later that the Jesus introduced in the opening words of his Gospel as “the Son of God,” is the Jesus of Calvary about whom the Roman soldier said, “Truly this man was the Son of God,” and is the same Jesus about whom the “young man” at the sepulchre said “He is risen; He is not here.”

In the lessons we come to now you will see that this gifted Gospel writer is always pointing us to the direction of Jesus from whom we today receive power to live and witness for Him in all sorts of circumstances. Our confidence can always be secure in the assurance that He gives power to all who receive Him (John 1:12). And later, Paul reassures us and validates our status when he writes, **“For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God” (Rom. 8:14)**.

Mark is the story of Jesus: **“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1)**. But a careful examination of this earliest Gospel, we see Jesus in a different light than Matthew, Luke, and John perceived Him. While all the writers give us similar details about Jesus’ life, Mark includes some information that only someone very familiar with Him could have known. The emotions of Jesus, His spur-of-the-moment reactions, even His inner responses are reported, Mark enables us to see Jesus, as Olympic broadcasters might put it, “Up close and personal.”

Examining the life of Jesus is an important enterprise. Most believers know individual stories about Jesus, or they are familiar with a few scattered texts. Far fewer have undertaken what this study encourages, namely, to look carefully at the words, deeds, and personality of Jesus. It is my hope that this study will allow us to confront Jesus in a fresh way.

When we look at Jesus “up close and personal” in Mark, we can receive certain impressions. Jesus was a popular teacher and healer. Mark shows that Jesus attained a

large following quickly, and crowds flooded Him wherever He went. The crowd is also the background against which Jesus makes quick decisions and dramatic actions. While healings were sometimes done in private, Jesus had a reputation that attracted large numbers of people.

At the same time it was the presence of the crowd that was a threat to the Pharisees, and on at least two occasions Mark indicates that Jesus' life would have been in danger earlier if the Jewish authorities had not feared the reaction of the crowds. Without a doubt, it was Jesus' popularity that caught the attention of the Pharisees and Sadducees in the first place. Had Jesus taught and healed in private in a way that did not threaten the religious establishment, they would not have paid much attention to Him at all.

For Jesus, the crowds were to be ministered to, and not to be a source of power and authority. He saw them as "sheep without a shepherd," and they came to Him for help. But Jesus knew He could not depend upon the masses of people for support and authority.

For this reason, He chose a few, the twelve disciples, to nurture and train for the extension of His ministry. Jesus continually called them apart for reflection and instruction but finding time and space for "disciple-building" was not easy. Readers of Mark can easily sense the frantic pace and keen sense of urgency that surrounded Jesus and the twelve disciples. In 6:31, a verse that only Mark records, we read that "many were coming and going, and they had no leisure."

So, Mark's Gospel captures a mood of crowd pressure and rapid movement. We know how the story ends, but we still can feel that an explosion is waiting to happen from the very beginning of the book.

Looking at Jesus "up close and personal" enables us to share the frustrations and disappointments He felt about the twelve disciples. Again and again, they just did not understand what Jesus meant by either His words or deeds. From the safety of our present-day world, we may feel the urge to shake them, as if they were naughty children, for being so thickheaded and self-centered. But had we been there I wonder if we would have reacted differently.

We may experience one dimension of the miracle of Jesus shaped in building a church on this small band of weak, self-absorbed not-too-bright followers. In the Gospel of Mark, we see the disciples "up close and personal."

Jesus' humanity is revealed in Mark as He confronts the Pharisees and labors with His disciples. Mark leaves no doubt that his Gospel is about a divine figure, the Son of God. But his story describes Jesus' moments of frustration, occasions of anger, and times of sorrow. Mark shows us a Jesus who is fully man as well as fully God.

When Jesus was relating to children, they saw Him as "tender" or "loving." As He outsmarted the Pharisees, a student might describe Him as "shrewd" or "clever." They saw Jesus "angry" or "frustrated," possibly even "grumpy," after reading the passage about the cursing of the fig tree. Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane was described as "lonely," "afraid," or "courageous."

This complex picture of Jesus allows His humanity and His divinity to come into focus for the students. Now we can better understand why those closest to Jesus had so much difficulty seeing His fullness.

When we read Mark, we also come to realize that we are seeing Jesus "through a glass darkly." We see Him through other eyes, not just our own. We also begin to understand that no matter how faithful we try to be as careful readers, we can never fully know Jesus except as an act of faith. We can call Him "Lord," and we can follow Him, but Jesus—the God-man—cannot be fully comprehended.

It is my hope that in studying Mark, you will feel and experience the Presence of Jesus in a new way. That is why any useful study must be accompanied by prayer. Jesus, "up close and personal," cannot be found by the limitations of words on paper. But when Jesus comes into our experience, we can know for certain that He will walk with us across our own Galilee of daily life.

05/15/24