

THE GOSPEL OF MARK
Mark 1:1—2:12

By
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The Gospel Background

In the winter of A.D. 64-65, a great fire broke out in Rome. It burned for six days and nights, destroying huge sections of the city. Emperor Nero, who is remembered for fiddling while Rome burned, was rumored to have been responsible for the fire. But Nero blamed the Christians, who were generally unpopular anyway. A reign of terror followed, and Peter and Paul were probably among its victims. Christians were crucified, torn apart by wild beasts in the arena, and burned at the stake. It was a time of unbelievable suffering.

Shortly after this terrible ordeal, Mark's Gospel appeared. Christians were facing persecution and martyrdom, and many were asking a crucial question: Why risk dying for their faith? It was a time when the remembered facts about Jesus needed to be written down. It was a matter of life and death.

Repeatedly we hear of a "secret" that must be kept until the right time comes. Mark knew the "secret." His readers within the Christian community knew it too, but the Gospel of Mark was written to show why that which is obvious to insiders (that Jesus is the Christ) is a mystery to others.

If we read the Gospel the way the earliest Christians did, it would be like watching a re-run of a tense true-to-life drama. Even though we would know the outcome, remembering the events and recalling the danger would rekindle our excitement and faith.

Preparing the Way

Mark's opening words show that the Christians of his day knew exactly who Jesus was: ***"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1)***. Jesus was not simply a good man who died a martyr's death. He was and is God among us, and His words and deeds continually amazed those around Him—particularly those who did not know His full identity.

"We know who Jesus is," Mark seems to be saying, "but the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the common folk, at times even the disciples, did not. That is why Jesus was rejected and killed. But we know, and therefore we will follow Him, even to death.

So, Jesus moves through Mark's Gospel almost incognito. He is always more than He appears. But although the other actors in the drama are only half aware of the Person with whom they are dealing, Mark has already taken his readers into confidence in his opening statement.

John the Baptist

Mark's readers also recognize the connection he makes between who they know Jesus to be and Old Testament predictions of the Messiah. Jesus did not come into a vacuum. Mark shared the view with other Christians that Jesus is the climax of history, and in Mark's Gospel, John the Baptist appears on the scene like an Old Testament prophet announcing the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah. Most certainly John is the fulfillment of the four-hundred-year-old prophecy, "***Behold I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me***" ... (Mal. 3:1). Mark's readers would readily identify John with Elijah by the way he dressed and by what he ate (1:6). He came out of the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord (1:7).

The times were ripe for a Messiah. Palestine was under Roman military and civil occupation. The common people were oppressed and neglected. Political agitators preached violent rebellion, and most of them were immediately executed. The Pharisees, who were supposed to provide religious leadership, were instead preoccupied with pious posturing and rule-following at the cost of authentic spiritual living and ministry.

Mark tells us that John had a considerable following: "... ***there went out unto him all the land of Judea, and they of Jerusalem***" (1:5). Huge crowds of people went to hear John. He was the leader of a genuine religious revival. Yet, his words shocked his listeners, "***There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose***" (1:7). To remove sandals was the work of a slave! Mark's readers, however, understood. As great as John was, they knew he had been the preface to the Living Word, Jesus Christ.

The message of John the Baptist was part of the preparation. He preached confession, repentance, and baptism, for the time when to receive Jesus as the Christ would require three responses: a recognition of separation from God (confession), a radical turn toward God (repentance), and a fresh spiritual dedication (baptism).

Mark's readers understood this point. They knew that one reason many people failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah was because they were not prepared. The same is true today: many of us cannot receive Christ as Lord because we too have overlooked the three vital steps of spiritual preparation.

Calling and Testing

Thoughtful readers of Mark often ask why Jesus needed to be baptized, particularly since John's baptism was one of repentance. After all, Jesus had not sinned. Why should He be baptized? Mark saw the baptism of Jesus as the moment when His call was defined. Jesus is an adult throughout the Gospel of Mark. It was assumed that He had grown up in Nazareth and faithfully discharged His duties to family and community. But Jesus' baptism signaled the beginning of His ministry, as the voice from heaven announced, ***"Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased"*** (1:11). John the Baptist represented a movement back to God, and Jesus identified Himself with that revival. At His baptism Jesus accepted the calling God had given Him.

It was a dramatic moment: ***"the heavens opened, and the Spirit descended upon Him like a dove"*** (1:10). But in Mark's Gospel little time is spent basking in the glory of these moments. He reports that the Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness where for forty days He was tempted of Satan (1:13). Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not give us any additional details of Jesus' temptation except to say that he was with "wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto Him."

Jesus' mountaintop baptism experience, followed immediately by His struggle with Satan in the wilderness, models a pattern that many of us have encountered in our own lives. We have heard the voice of God and responded with commitment and service. But our "highs" have often been closely followed by "lows." We have gone to places or met people who resisted our efforts, tried our patience, or tempted us with unlimited opportunities to compromise our callings.

One reason Jesus continues to speak to our condition today is that He is intimately acquainted with the temptations we face.

Mark records the beginning of Jesus' ministry in 1:14. He sets a fast pace in telling the story. As we have said before, if this drama were made into a movie, it would be an action film. Mark writes with urgency. His Gospel is a series of episodes that are loosely tied together. Some incidents are told with considerable detail. Other events are noted with only a brief summary to show a connection.

"Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee" (1:14). To leap into Jesus' ministry with so little comment about John's arrest startles our thinking. Mark simply reports the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the few words that summarize the Lord's message, ***"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe the gospel"*** (1:15).

Note the mood and tense of these words: *Now*, the immediate present, is the time. To “believe” is to give oneself in trust and obedience to God who is making Himself known in the words and deeds of Jesus. The sense of immediate urgency expressed here is characteristic of Mark’s writing style.

Jesus Calls His Disciples and Us

The calling of the first four disciples has been a favorite passage for preachers from the day it first appeared in writing. It not only captures the urgency that is in the Gospel, but it also provides a model for all believers (1:16-20).

Here we see Jesus moving purposefully along the shore of the Sea of Galilee. First, He sees Simon and Andrew fishing, and when He said, ***“Come ye after Me, and I will make you become fishers of me,”*** they ***“straightway forsook their nets and followed Him.”*** Jesus then went on a little farther along the shore and saw James and John mending their fishing nets. Mark now tells us that “straightway He called them: and they left their father Zebedee in the ship with the hired servants and went after Him” (1:16-19). The word “straightway,” translated “immediately” in later versions, is a favorite with Mark. Used as it is here and throughout the Gospel it expresses the urgency and immediacy of the action taken.

There is no reason to assume that these four men were at this moment seeing Jesus for the first time. There is indication in the Gospel of Matthew and Luke that the four had previous contact with Jesus. And there is every reason to assume that they were ready to respond. Their immediate response does not mean they were being impulsive.

The fact that the first four persons called were fishermen hooks us. They had no training to become disciples and witnesses. Lack of qualifications can never be an excuse for refusing to follow Jesus. It was Jesus who chose ordinary human beings to be His disciples.

The selection of disciples is also an invitation to companionship with Jesus, a calling into a new kind of community. The Kingdom of God has been announced and now, “straightway,” there is work to be done. Discipleship is not a private matter but a shared adventure. While answering God’s call is never a thoughtless act, it is more like falling in love than it like figuring out a math problem.

It was no accident that Mark used a common fishing term in describing Jesus’ promise to make them “fishers of men.” In the Greek language in which the Gospel was written it means to “take alive,” and it describes catching fish in such a way that they

would still be alive when brought to shore for sale. This shows how the disciples and Jesus were to be companions in the ongoing task of calling others, loving and caring for people, and announcing that God's new day had dawned. The mission was "to take people alive."

As Mark's story moves swiftly toward its climax on the cross, Jesus is presented as a man of action, constantly moving about, challenging opponents, and entering synagogues to proclaim the Good News. The first stop on this journey was a synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus established a pattern for His ministry that was repeated over and over: combining teaching and healing (1:21-28).

The way Jesus' ministry unfolded makes a lot of sense. First, He was called and tested. Next, He chose disciples. Then, He began His teaching and healing in the most logical place, the synagogue. In those days Jewish synagogues had no permanent teacher. The ruler of the synagogue could ask any competent person to read and expound Scripture. Jesus was a travelling teacher, and local synagogues provided a convenient pulpit. And in this beginning phase of His ministry, before the religious leaders became hostile toward Him, He was free to enter the synagogue and speak openly. This He did, for as Matthew wrote, "***Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues ... (Matt. 4:23).***

Mark reports that the people were "astonished" at His teaching. Today we might say that Jesus "blew their minds." Why? Because He taught "***as one that had authority, and not as the scribes***" (1:22). The scribes always began their teaching by quoting as many authorities as possible, usually introducing their lessons with the phrase, "There is a teaching." Jesus depended upon His personal authority for credibility. The scribes teaching lacked authenticity and failed to be convincing, while Jesus' message had the ring of truth.

Now while Jesus was teaching in the synagogue that day, a mentally deranged man approached Him trembling with fear. The term "unclean spirit" is commonly used in the New Testament for a demon. Demon possession was thought to be responsible for many forms of sickness and misery. Human beings were at the mercy of demons unless they were protected by a stronger spiritual power. When persons were possessed, they often functioned as if they had split personalities. They might speak as if they were the demons themselves, as indeed the poor man in this account did.

The first time Jesus is recognized as the Messiah after His ministry began, was by this demon-possessed man, "***I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God***" (1:24). But Jesus quickly ordered him to be silent, "***Hold thy peace, and come out***

of him” (1:25). Again, Mark answers here a crucial question, which his whole Gospel addresses: “Why wasn’t Jesus recognized as the Son of God during His time on earth?” At this early-stage Mark shows that Jesus was known by the forces who had the most reason to fear Him—the demons.

A belief generally held by the people in those days was that the reign of the Messiah would mark the end of demons. Jesus, therefore, was an ultimate threat to demons and their powers to possess people. There were other exorcists, but demons themselves would be able to identify the authentic Messiah from the frauds.

The response of the people to Jesus’ expelling the demon from this man is significant. Just as the people in the synagogue were astonished that Jesus taught with authority, so were they amazed at His ability to heal. From our perspective, with almost 2,000 years of Christian experience behind us, their verbal response seems strange, ***“What thing is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority commandeth He even the unclean spirits, and they do obey Him” (1:27).***

We are tempted to knock at the skepticism and lack of faith expressed by the people in the synagogue that day. Yet, we are in a position like those first-century people. Our problem is like theirs: How can we rise above a second-hand experience of Jesus Christ and become first-person channels of God’s power and grace? Even today, genuine, vital, and challenging Christian faith consistently astonishes and amazes people.

Mark shows us that the common people, who did not fully know who Jesus was, were conscious that He was somebody special, ***“immediately His fame spread abroad.”*** Jesus’ reputation as an authoritative teacher-healer sent shock waves ***“throughout all the region round about Galilee” (1:28).***

Then what did Jesus do? ***“... immediately, when they were coming out of the synagogue, they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew”*** where He performed a private healing (1:29). The incident takes place in Peter’s home in Capernaum, located close by the synagogue. The story as told may have come from Peter’s own recollection. It shows how Jesus’ healing miracles were not done in order to increase His fame. Sometimes crowds were present; at other times, Jesus healed in the presence of only a few.

In both the private and public healing events, there was a common denominator—Jesus healed without elaborate ceremony. In the synagogue before the congregation, He gave a simple verbal command, and the demon-possessed man was healed. La-

ter, in the seclusion of a private home, Jesus took Peter's mother-in-law by the hand and lifted her up, and her fever left her. Ordinary exorcists, then and now, often employed complicated charms and magical rituals. But Jesus' healing miracles were without "show biz." The power was in the Person, and He made the healings fresh and genuine.

Later that evening Peter's house was surrounded by people seeking healing, for they recognized Jesus as a doer and not just a talker. Throughout Mark's Gospel he records more of Jesus' deeds than he does Jesus' words. After all, ideas do not have to be told. They can spring up on their own. The idea that God loves us might occur to any thoughtful and spiritually minded person. But an act of love must be reported in order to make a difference. Jesus' ministry of word and deed was sufficient. There was no need for the hype that accompanies so much of our actions. Jesus never called a press conference.

The next morning, after the energy-draining outpouring of compassion the night before, Jesus felt the need to be alone in prayer "*...rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into solitary place, and there prayed*" (1:35). The fact that He prayed makes His life more relevant to ours. Praying is something which He and we have in common.

In Mark's Gospel, we see Jesus frequently praying alone. In times of stress, temptation, and decision, He turns to God for guidance and strength. The minute we categorize Jesus as a "man of action," Mark reminds us that the source of His amazing teaching and healing sprang from His practice of continual prayer.

Simon Peter and his friends soon found Jesus and interrupted His quiet time with the news that "*All men seek for thee*" (1:37). Jesus responded immediately. A paraphrase of His words may more clearly capture their meaning: "Let's hit the road, to places we have not been before, for this is my task" (see 1:38). His calling made Him sensitive to human need, whether it was for telling the Good News or demonstrating it. By His calling, Jesus shows us prayer is not a substitute for living the Christian life. Prayer prepares the believer for service; then empowers the believer to serve.

So, Jesus set out, preaching in the "synagogues throughout all Galilee." Mark describes His travels in one verse (1:39), but since Jesus went all over Galilee, it must have taken Him several weeks to complete His journey.

Along the way a leper came and asked for healing. This is the third account of an individual healing in the Gospel. It focuses on the role faith plays in the process more clearly than the first two healings do. The leper acknowledges Jesus' power when he says, "***If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean***" (1:40). This was a great hope, for no disease was more feared in those times than leprosy. It carried the same psychological fear that a pronouncement of cancer carries today. It also had a terrible social stigma.

Lepers were banished from fellowship with friends and peers. They were forced to live alone and were ordered to go around with torn clothes and bared heads. Whenever they approached other people, they had to shout the warning, "Unclean! Unclean!" Lepers experienced double jeopardy—both physical pain and personal humiliation.

But Jesus physically touched this leper and did not worry about His own health or status. He violated the law and then said, "***Be thou clean.***" Jesus knew that if the leper spread the news of his healing, it would become more difficult to move freely about the country. So, He "sternly" charged him to say nothing. But the leper who had been healed went out and told everyone, and people "came to Jesus from every quarter" (1:45).

This incident illustrated Jesus' wholistic ministry. He healed the leper's physical illness, but He was equally concerned with the man's need to re-enter society. So, Jesus insisted that the leper go through the Mosaic ritual of cleansing so that he would no longer be an outcast (1:44).

The same, by analogy, is true today. Someone may be healed by surgery or counseling, but that person may continue to feel embarrassed by its scars. A woman may recover from a mastectomy and still feel incomplete. A man may overcome a drinking problem and continue to wonder if friends will ever trust him again. Health is more than the absence of disease. It is also a positive attitude, and Jesus knew that a leper is finally cured only when he no longer feels unclean.

Mark's fast-moving account of Jesus' ministry brings Him back to His headquarters in Capernaum. By now the scene described is a familiar one: Jesus, the teacher-healer, is in a house and the crowds are literally pushing and shoving to enter. As Mark puts it, "***...there was not room to receive them, no, not so much as about the door***" (2:2).

What happened next was an incident that most of us brought up in Sunday school know well (2:1-12). Mark wants us to see more than the obvious. It is indeed, a story of healing by Jesus, the fourth individual example recorded in the Gospel. But it is different from any other healing miracle Mark records.

It is the only healing account in the Gospel in which Jesus connects illness and sin. In that duty, sickness and sin were closely associated, and the belief that sin caused illness was commonly held. The book of Job and several of the Psalms seem to reflect that view. Even today, people in pain often ask, “What did I do to deserve this?” Here, Jesus addresses that mind-set, and He does so to the complete surprise of the scribes who were present.

If this healing miracle had been like others, Jesus’ opening words probably would have simply been, “Be healed.” Instead, Jesus said to the paralytic, **“Son, thy sins be forgiven thee” (2:5)**. His words carried a double meaning, for He was speaking to the paralyzed man and delivering a message to the scribes.

Had Jesus simply healed the man, it would have been one more observable act of compassion. But He pronounced forgiveness, and to do so violated practice and long-standing Hebrew beliefs. He had stopped healing and started meddling! It was a saying of Jewish faith that only God could forgive sins. For any human to claim to do so was blasphemy, for which the law (Lev. 24:16) mandated the penalty of death.

The nit-picking scribes had been waiting for just such a moment. They had caught Jesus in a public statement so outrageous they were sure it would work against Him. But Mark’s account suggests that Jesus knew exactly what He was doing. His act of healing was more than a simple compassionate deed—it was a sign of His divinity. His words combined with His deed in a way that baffled the scribes, **“... that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (He says to the sick of the palsy) I say unto thee, arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house” (2:11)**.

Jesus had caught them in their own trap. Any wandering preacher could mouth the words, **“Your sins are forgiven,”** as dangerous as such pronouncements might be. But when the words were linked with an act of healing, it provided proof of Jesus’ authority. Since the scribes believed that sickness and sin went together, Jesus in effect said to them, **“If sin caused this man’s paralysis, then his healing is evidence that My ability to forgive sins is genuine.”**

In twenty-first century America, we treat forgiveness lightly, even the forgiveness of God. Claiming the authority to forgive sins was no light matter and forgiving them was a costly act. This confrontation was the beginning of the scribes' and Pharisees' outright hostility toward Jesus. It is the first of fifteen controversies between Jesus and orthodox Judaism that Mark gives us in his Gospel. At this time Jesus signed His own death warrant. The religious leaders did not recognize who He was, but One who could speak for God was a clear threat to the wooden legalism they represented. On that point, they were correct.

05/22 & 29/24