

The Good News as told by Mark

The Prologue (Mark 1:1)

In these difficult and strange times it is right and proper that we turn to God with renewed vigour, seeking both strength to face our current situation and assurance that all things are still working together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28). To help us in times such as this we might turn to theology and doctrine to find meaning, or we might look to saints of old and try to rediscover what strengthened them in times of trouble. Both these routes may be helpful, but I think it is more appropriate for us to follow the advice of the Preacher and fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). So over the next few weeks we are going back to basics and reflecting on the life, ministry and teaching of Jesus. We will do this through the eyes of Mark. We will not be looking at every verse in Mark's gospel, rather we will try to see the big picture that Mark paints for us. As always, our aim is not so much to become academic Bible scholars, but doers of the word (James 1:22).

We will be looking at the opening section (Mark 1:1-8:26). This long section shows Jesus preaching and healing widely throughout all Palestine. Great crowds flocked to him, but all was not well almost from the beginning. Not only did the crowds fail to understand Jesus, but bitter opposition from the religious leaders began almost at once and followed him to the cross. Throughout this period, Jesus kept the 'Messianic secret', that is, he did not tell people openly who he was.

Introducing Mark and his gospel

There is an art to writing opening sentences. Journalists are taught two principles:

- an opening sentence should be no longer than twenty-four words
- it should answer the journalist's questions - "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" and "How?" with those twenty-four words. Only the question "Why?" should be reserved for the following sentences.

Mark would excel as a journalist. In the opening sentence to his Gospel, he uses twelve words and answers all the questions except "Where?" which he reserves for later. "When?" is answered by Mark's choice of the opening words, "The beginning of the gospel". Mark sees a timeline for the Gospel that reaches back into prophetic history (he quotes from two prophets in the next two verses, touches this present world and continues into a glorious future. "The beginning" is not just a moment in time, it is a step in eternity.

"Beginning" can also mean the basics, the "first things," or "elementary principles", the starting point, not just in time, but in understanding - if you want to know Jesus, Mark claims, then this is the place to start.

"What?" is answered by the single word "gospel." Better translated "Good News", we'll return to this and the question, "Who?" in a moment.

Author - Mark

Mark's Gospel, like the other Gospels, is technically anonymous. However, the early church fathers consistently claim that it was written by John Mark. John (Hebrew name) Mark (Roman name) is mentioned in the New Testament ten times (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:37, 39; Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:13). From these references we know that Mark was the cousin of Barnabas (Colossians 4:10). We know that Mark's mother was named Mary and that their house served as a meeting place for early Christians. This house was the house Peter visited upon his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12:12) and is the possible location of the upper room for the last supper. We also know that Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 12:25; 13:5), but returned to Jerusalem before the completion of the work. Paul considered this a defection and refused to allow Mark to accompany him on the next journey (Acts 15:36–41). Mark recovered from this setback and was later a co-worker with Paul (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 24), and was in fact considered "useful" to Paul (2 Timothy 4:11).

Biblical evidence, as well as information from early church fathers, demonstrates a close connection between Peter and Mark. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter calls Mark "my son" and there was a tight bond between Peter and Mark. Church fathers refer to Mark as "Peter's interpreter," and it is probable that Peter's preaching and eyewitness testimony were the primary sources for Mark's Gospel. It is interesting that these two men shared a common experience of failure and restoration. Believers today can be encouraged that through Christ we can find forgiveness and restoration to usefulness.

Place and date - Rome, 65-68 AD

Several writings of church fathers state that Mark's Gospel was written in Rome, though the exact date is not clear. Some early church sources state that Mark was written after Peter's death (67–68) while others state that Mark wrote while Peter was still alive. Either way, it was written before 70 AD, probably between 65–68.

Recipients - Roman Christians

Written for a Roman audience, Mark explains Jewish customs (7:2–4; 15:42); translates Aramaic words and phrases into Greek (3:17; 5:41; 7:11, 34; 15:22); and uses Latin terms rather than Greek equivalents (5:9; 12:15, 42; 15:16, 39).

Purpose - encouragement for persecuted believers

Mark's audience of Roman Christians living 65–68 found themselves facing bitter persecution. The Roman emperor Nero had blamed the Christians for starting the fire which burned the city of Rome in 64. Christians were arrested, tortured, and killed. Mark wrote to encourage those Christians who were facing these difficult circumstances. His book portrays Jesus as the "Suffering Servant" (cf. Isaiah 53) who was himself falsely accused of wrongdoing, and who suffered and gave his life for them. These Roman Christians (as well as believers today) needed to recognize that being a disciple of Jesus Christ is costly, but that they were facing no more than their Master had already faced for them.

"What?" - the Good News

As Mark tells the story of Jesus he explains what he means by "Good news". Mark 1:14f tell us that the good news is about the Kingdom of God and repentance. The Greek word translated as "gospel" means "a reward for bringing good news" or simply "good news." In Isaiah 40:9,

the prophet proclaimed the “good tidings” that God would rescue his people from captivity. In his first sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus quoted Isaiah 61:1 to characterize his ministry: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel [good news] to the poor” (Luke 4:18).

The gospel is not a new plan of salvation; it is the fulfilment of God’s plan of salvation that was begun in Israel, was completed in Jesus Christ, and is made known by the church.

The gospel is the saving work of God in his Son Jesus Christ and a call to faith in him (Romans 1:16–17). Jesus is more than a messenger of the good news; he is the good news. The good news of God was present in his life, teaching, and atoning death. Therefore, the good news is both a historical event and a personal relationship. Faith is more than intellectual agreement to a theoretical truth. Faith is trust placed in a living person, Jesus Christ.

The basic elements in the good news were these:

- the prophecies have been fulfilled and the new age inaugurated by the coming of Christ
- he died according to the Scriptures, to deliver his people from this evil age
- he was buried, and raised again the third day, according to the Scriptures
- he is exalted at God’s right hand as Son of God, Lord of living and dead
- he will come again to judge the world and consummate his saving work.

"Who?" - Jesus Christ, the Son of God

Of course, it all depends upon the question “Who?” Mark answers with the name of Jesus, the personal name for a man with whom we can identify. Mark does not shy away from the full humanity of Jesus. In fact, he makes him more human than any other Gospel writer. Jesus is the Son of Man who serves and suffers. The life story of Peter and Mark shows through: one denies Jesus, the other is a dropout. Like us, they need to know someone who understands them, who serves and suffers with them and who forgives and restores them. So this Gospel begins, not with the royalty of Matthew, the perfection of Luke, nor the mysticism of John, but with the humanity of Jesus.

Amen

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