

Finer Grounds

Mark

Lesson 1: The Man, the Message, the Mission

Without question the most captivating story known to mankind is that of the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Mark's account of the salvation brought to mankind through the man Jesus Christ is artfully interwoven with intrigue, secrets, and miraculous occurrences. Yet who was this man, Mark? How did he gain such inner knowledge of the deity, the man, Christ? Why did the Holy Spirit guide him to record these events and preserve them for us today? What are we to learn from this gospel account about Jesus Christ? In the lessons that follow we will address these questions and more as we delve into the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded for us by John Mark.

Before you Begin:

What knowledge do you already have about the book of Mark? Write down what you already know and compare and contrast it as you work through this study.

What questions do you have about the man Jesus Christ that you hope Mark will answer for you?

As you read through this Gospel, who do you most easily identify with and why? What can you learn from this person's interactions with Jesus?

Take Action:

Read through the entire book of Mark in one sitting. Do your best to ignore chapter/verse markings and read it as one continuous story. Take special note of words/phrases that occur frequently and write them down.

Mark: The Man

Mark's full name is John Mark; John being his Hebrew name, Mark his Greek name, as seen in Acts 12:12 (Orbison and Petrillo 2004). One of the fascinating things about Mark is that he could be called the "wallflower" of Scripture. He is only mentioned in passing, and only infrequently even then. He is not a main participant in the ministries mentioned in Scripture, and one of the most prominent instances of Mark's life recorded for us is negative as it puts him squarely in the middle of a dispute between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:37-40).

Because of this many believe that we don't have much information about Mark himself; not true! For starters, we know that Mark's mother was a woman named Mary, and that she was such

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a devoted follower of Christ that Peter knew to look for the brethren at her home after he was miraculously released from prison (Acts 12:12). We also know that Mark was the nephew of the influential missionary Barnabas (Colossians 4:10).

Additionally, Scripture tells us that Mark traveled with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 12:25), and that he left early leading to a disagreement between Paul and Barnabas when Barnabas wanted Mark to accompany them a second time (Acts 15:37-40). What many fail to realize is that later Paul and Mark are reconciled, and Mark once again serves alongside Paul (Philemon 24, 2 Timothy 4:11).

Mark also had a very close relationship with the apostle Peter, who cared for him so deeply that he referred to Mark as “his son” (I Peter 5:13). Indeed, it is commonly believed that Mark’s Gospel is a written record of the teachings and experiences of Peter (Swete 1898).

So who was Mark, the man? Much like the apostle Paul, he was a man uniquely placed and qualified to be one of the first written proclaimers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. His mother and uncle were both highly influential leaders in the first century church, he personally witnessed miracles performed by the Holy Spirit (miracles while traveling with Paul, as well as Peter’s miraculous escape from prison), he was personally mentored by the apostle Peter, and it is very likely that he personally witnessed Jesus’ arrest and abandonment by the apostles. He had seen the man, the deity of Christ, and he had seen the life-changing influence this man had on all those he encountered. As a result, he was a man who wanted to proclaim the gospel to the world.

Think About It:

Have you ever been discouraged by the immaturity of a younger Christian? How did you handle the situation? Is there a need to be reconciled?

Take Action:

Is there currently a younger Christian that you are mentoring as Paul, Barnabas and Peter did Mark? If not, make a list of specific people that you can mentor in their spiritual growth, and specific ways to reach out to them.

While Mark’s authorship of this Gospel account is not questioned today, many people do not realize that there is no textual evidence affirming his authorship. The closest is Mark 14:51-52, which refers to a “young man” following at a distance at Jesus’ arrest. This reference is not found in any of the other Gospel accounts, and it is believed to have been included in Mark’s account of the Gospel because the young man mentioned was Mark Himself.

However, there is tremendous evidence in church history that Mark is the author of this Gospel account. Early church historians beginning with Papias in 130 AD, and including: The Muratorian Fragment (193-216 AD), Tertullian (193-216), Clement of Alexandria (190-200 AD) and Origen (210-255 AD) are in complete agreement on Mark’s authorship (Orbison and Petrillo 2004). Church history also

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tells us that Mark traveled to Alexandria, where he established several congregations and eventually became an elder (Lenksi 1961).

Mark: The Message

The Gospel of Mark is commonly accepted as the very first written Gospel account (Swete 1898). In fact, the term “Gospel” itself is taken from Mark’s original title for his account of the life of Christ (France 2002). One of the primary reasons for this belief is the extent to which Mark is quoted in the other synoptic (same) gospels (Matthew and Luke). In fact, out of the 661 verses found in Mark, only 24 do not occur in Matthew or Luke (Swete 1898).

While we cannot know definitively, many scholars believe that Mark penned his account of the life of Christ while in Rome, either shortly before or after Peter’s martyrdom around the year 64 AD (Orbison & Petrillo 2004). It can be said confidently, however, that it was penned before the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD as Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple in Mark 13:11-12.

Mark’s theme is clearly seen in his opening statement, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” (Mark 1:1). It is interesting to note the meaning of the word “beginning” here. In the Greek this is the word “arche” which more accurately means the cause of the beginning (Zodhiates 2000). The Gospels of Mark and John are the only two which do not specifically mention the birth of Christ, yet they both begin with the word “arche”. These books do not describe the physical beginning of Jesus, but rather the fact that He is the beginning of everything. He “arched” (caused) the beginning of the world (John 1:1) and his perfect life, death, and resurrection were the “arche” of the Christian

age, and indeed of man’s redemption. Mark begins his gospel account by proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ (Mark 1:1), by the middle of the book the apostles proclaim the Lordship of Christ (Mark 8:27-29), and finally the book concludes with even the Gentiles proclaiming that Jesus Christ was the Son of God (Mark 15:39).

While reading Mark’s Gospel there are many key words to keep in mind. Key words and phrases are those which appear many times within a specific text, or those which appear in important places such as prayers, or are surrounded by petition verbs (urge, beseech, etc.) Noticing these words can help us note what is of particular importance to the author, and what the main point he’s driving at is. Some key words in the book of Mark are:

- God/Lord
- Immediately
- Son
- Disciple
- Come/Coming
- Say
- Faith
- Follow

Take Action:

Read back through the book of Mark and highlight or underline each time you see a keyword.

Using the key words, write a sentence defining the theme of the book of Mark.

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Mark: The Mission

Mark's Gospel account is beautifully written in a very dramatic style. When one reads Mark's account with chapter and verse breaks it is easy to miss the literary touch and the drama Mark endeavored to create in his writing. One way in which Mark strove to do this was by creating a feeling of immediacy in the text. He accomplished this with frequent use of the word "immediately," as well as present tense verbs such as "says" rather than "said" (Swete 1898). It is also seen by the use of description and emotion that often lacks in other New Testament writing:

"If the traditional connection with Peter has any validity, there may be as much memory as art in such features as Jesus' anger and 'snorting' over the leper (1:41, 43) and his mental torture described in Gethsemane (14:33-34), or in the disciples' guilty silence in 9:34 and the graphic description of the scared and bewildered group who followed Jesus on the road to Jerusalem in 10:32," (France 2002).

It seems that his goal was to make Jesus, his ministry, and the struggles of his disciples as real and relatable as possible. This could point to Mark's audience being Roman Gentiles who were less likely to have experienced Jesus' ministry firsthand (Orbison & Petrillo 2004). More evidences pointing towards this specific audience are: the fact that Mark frequently explains Jewish customs that would have needed no explanation for a Jewish audience, his frequent explanations of Aramaic expressions that Jews would have understood, and the discussion in 10:12 regarding women being allowed to initiate divorce, which was legal under Roman law but not under the Jewish law (Orbison & Petrillo 2004). A final

evidence for a Roman audience is the genre of the writing. Mark's dramatic writing style, designed to create word pictures and stir emotions when read orally, would have held special appeal to the Roman culture of Mark's day.

Think About It:

Imagine being a Roman citizen reading Mark's account of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. How does this compare to your reaction as a 21st century reader?

Mark's Gospel account is a beautiful depiction of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. As we study through this book keep in mind Peter, and the unique relationship he had with both Jesus and Mark. Put yourself in their shoes and imagine what it would have been like to witness firsthand Jesus' interactions with the Scribes and Pharisees, the miracles that he performed, and the way each different group of people responded to Him. Imagine loving and trusting Jesus, but the fear it must have created as you slowly began to understand that what your people have taught for generations, and who and what Jesus really was, were different. Imagine the inner turmoil that not only Jesus, but his apostles would have felt as his ministry progressed. And last of all, let Mark create images for you with his words. Let him describe the environment, the reactions and the emotions Jesus and his apostles experienced as we walk with Jesus through his last three years on Earth.

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Take Action:

Try reading the book of Mark out loud as it was originally intended. Be careful of exaggerated pauses at verse and chapter breaks, remember those would not have been in the original text. How does this change your perception of the book?

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