

## The Gospel according to Mark

### *Take Up Your Cross*

#### Background

**M**ATTHEW IS the first book in the New Testament, so why does this book begin with Mark? Mark was the first person to write a New Testament gospel, which seems to be a form of writing that he invented.<sup>1</sup> Therefore Mark is the earliest gospel.

#### *Who Was Mark?*

According to Papias, an early church bishop of Asia Minor, Mark may have been an interpreter of Peter. (I heard the Papias story in college, and it has come around to favor again.) Mark heard stories about Jesus and probably read some. He spoke Greek but struggled to write it well. The most emotional of the evangelists, Mark saw the world through dark glasses. He talks about the disciples as having no faith (4:40) and wonders if they will ever understand his mission and forthcoming suffering (8:21). In a word, in Mark they are “uncomprehending.”<sup>2</sup>

Mark was very focused on the meaning of the cross and suffering. Mark’s belief (recorded in 10:45) that “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many,” is like a hearty filling of a sandwich. The two slices of sandwich bread are two stories of restored sight in 8:22–26 and 10:46–52. My sandwich analogy is a take-off on scholarly commentary. “Very important for the structure of the gospel as a whole is something like a large ‘sandwich’ in the middle of the gospel (8:22—10:52).”<sup>3</sup> In summary, Duling and Perrin go on to

1. Harrington, *Who is Jesus?* 21.
2. *Ibid.*, *How to Read the Gospels*, 23.
3. Duling and Perrin, *New Testament*, 304–5.

say that the section in which Jesus tried to explain the necessity for his suffering and gives three passion predictions (8:27—10:45) sandwiched between two stories of people being given their sight. The passion predictions are in 8:31, 9:31 and 10:33–34. The stories about restored sight are in 8:22–26 and 10:46–52.

### *What Did Mark Write?*

Mark wrote a gospel. In addition to describing a form of writing, the word *gospel* also means proclamation about God's love shown in the life, death, and (in Christian belief) resurrection of Jesus.

Mark's gospel is something like biographies of famous leaders in the Greek world who were willing to die for their people, as Jesus did. More important, Mark's gospel is a theological story about Jesus the Christ. While Mark did not use the best Greek, he did the best he could to preserve stories about Jesus's life, teachings, and passion and therefore used his abilities to the glory of God.

### *To Whom Did Mark Write?*

He wrote to Christians who were persecuted. These Gentile Christians (that is, Christians who had not been Jews first) needed to know more about Jewish customs. Mark's audience was an early sect that expected that Christ would return shortly.

The picture of Jesus that Mark painted with words spoke to Mark's community. Mark's Jesus is the suffering son of God and Son of Man, who will in the future bring in the kingdom in all its fullness. Mark was not aware that in time Christians would understand Jesus as the second person of the Trinity. Yet to Mark, the Son of Man is more than is a prophet. Jesus is akin, perhaps even in his own mind, to a high-ranking saint, who fulfills the role of Son of Man who is similar to the "One like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven" in Daniel 7:13. Biblical scholar Morna D. Hooker says that in Mark's gospel Jesus accepted the calling of the saints of the Most High, who suffer at the hands of God's enemies who are promised final vindication.<sup>4</sup>

### *When and Where Did Mark Write His Gospel?*

The Gospel of Mark was written in about 70 AD, likely in Rome.

4. Hooker, *Gospel according to Saint Mark*, 90.

## The Text

### *Color*

Mark's favorite words that color his writing are *no faith*, *amazed* or *astonished*, and *immediately*. He often describes the disciples as not having faith. Jesus's deeds amaze people. Characters take immediate action. Likewise, Mark's story moves quickly. In order to make transitions in his stories, he often wrote, "Truly I tell you."

In the story of the feeding of the five thousand (6:30–44), Mark tells us that the people sat down in groups on the green grass. He is the only evangelist to tell us the color of the grass in feeding stories. (John does tell us there was a lot of grass in the place.) His mentioning the color green suggests that Mark might have been thinking of Psalm 23 and understood Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Or maybe, emotional Mark was just more sensitive to color than Matthew, Luke, and John.

### *Texture*

The very first verse in Mark is a textured allusion to Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7 and 61:1, where "good news" suggests glad tidings of salvation. Nuances of meaning are heralding and announcing, which is what John the Baptist did for Jesus.

### *Line*

The plot line is summarized in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mark 12:1–12). Jesus the Christ, as beloved Son of God in keeping with God's will, but with the help of some Jewish leaders, had to suffer. Mark's line can be broken into two parts:

1. Chapters 1–8. Jesus teaches, preaches, and heals in Galilee.
2. Chapters 9–16. Jesus takes his disciples on an educational trip between Galilee and Jerusalem and predicts his forthcoming suffering and death. The end of the gospel is like a two-pronged fork because there are two endings, which are a short ending and a long ending. The short ending ends with the empty tomb, while the longer ending rounds out the story with postresurrection appearances.

## The Story Line

### *Part 1: Proclamation of God's Reign*

Jesus teaches, preaches, and heals in Galilee through powerful words and deeds.

#### **Chapter 1**

Instead of starting with a story about Jesus's birth as do Matthew and Luke, Mark fast-forwards to the proclamation of John the Baptist—that someone more powerful than John will come. Jesus is baptized by John and tempted in the wilderness where he dwells peacefully with wild animals. Jesus calls his first disciples; and he heals a distraught man, Simon's mother-in-law, and a leper.

#### **Chapter 2**

Jesus tells a paralyzed man that his sins are forgiven before telling him to take up his pallet and walk. Because Jesus's power to forgive sin is a new thing, people are amazed. Explaining that he came not for the righteous but for sinners, Jesus eats with sinners and tax collectors. He states that the Sabbath was made for humanity.

#### **Chapter 3**

Jesus backs up his assertion that the Sabbath was made for humanity by healing a man with a withered hand. Jesus appoints the twelve disciples and declares that his family is the people who do God's will.

#### **Chapter 4**

Jesus tells parables about the kingdom or reign of God. The parable of the sower (4:3–9) is about Jesus's teachings taking root and growing in good soil. Mark's explanation of the parable is like a sermon for children in the early church. The following stories of the growing seed, which is unique to Mark; and the mustard seed that grows into a shrub large enough to shelter birds suggests the growth of the kingdom from small to large.

Mark captures a vivid picture of Jesus's power over chaos, symbolized by Jesus's power to calm the storm. The disciples panic with fright when a storm blows up and tosses their boat around. In Mark's story of faith, Jesus puts his trust in God and goes to sleep. After Jesus's disciples wake him up, Jesus commands the sea to be still, and the wind and the sea obey.

## Chapter 5

Jesus heals a distraught man by driving the man's demons into pigs that rush into the sea and drown. This man had been sick, but he was smart enough to recognize Jesus as *Son of the Most High God*. People are amazed. Jesus heals a woman with a flow of blood and declares that her faith has made her well. Then Jesus heals a twelve-year-old girl thought to be dead, but who was sleeping.

## Chapter 6

Jesus teaches in his hometown synagogue where people are astounded yet dismiss Jesus. Rejected in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus cannot do deeds of power there. Jesus sends out the twelve. John the Baptist is killed after challenging Herod's ethics. Jesus feeds the hungry people, who are like sheep without a shepherd. In this story of the miraculous feeding of five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, the people sit on the green grass.

Jesus walks on water and tells his disciples, who think that he is a ghost, to not be afraid for *It is I*. Mark's implication is that Jesus is to his disciples like God was in Moses's experience. In Exodus 3:13, God reveals God's self to Moses with the words, *I AM WHO I AM*.

## Chapter 7

Jesus identifies destructive attitudes and actions. Jesus is not concerned about eating patterns but does care about spiritual food poisoning that includes theft and murder. Instead of being overly tied to food regulations, Jesus redefines ritual purity as righteous or good behavior.

Jesus broadens his ministry to include non-Jews by healing the Syrophoenician woman's daughter. Mark's Gentile audience would not lose the message that they are also in God's care. Jesus then cures a deaf man with a speech impediment. Restored hearing symbolizes the ability to hear religiously. Again people are astonished.

## Chapter 8

Mark relates another feeding story. Then, Jesus heals a blind man. This healing takes place in two stages. At first, after Jesus puts saliva in the blind man's eyes, he sees people, but not clearly. The people are like "trees walking." Then after Jesus's second touch, the man sees more clearly, as eventually the disciples will in the rest of the story. Therefore, this story of improving sight sets the stage for the second part of Mark's gospel when Jesus takes his disciples on an educational trip on which Jesus instructs them

about his identity and the cost of discipleship.<sup>5</sup> “A journey through Galilee begins with Jesus’s second prediction of his passion (9:30–32), which once again the disciples do not understand.”<sup>6</sup> Some learning took place on the educational journey. Following the story of the blind man (9:22–26), Peter articulates his insight and faith by saying to Jesus, “You are the Messiah” (9:27–30). Jesus again foretells his death (9:31–33) and calls his followers to take up their cross and follow him, while telling his disciples that those who lose their lives for his sake will find their lives (9:34).

### *Part 2: Extension of Jesus’s Ministry*

Jesus takes his disciples on an educational trip between Galilee and Jerusalem and predicts his forthcoming suffering and death.

#### **Chapter 9**

The story of the transfiguration symbolizes Jesus’s participation in God’s glory and may reflect a mystical experience of Jesus’s union with God. Jesus heals an epileptic boy through prayer. The boy’s father is moved to say, “I believe; help my unbelief!” Again Jesus foretells his death and resurrection. The disciples do not understand and are afraid to ask. Greatness is defined as welcoming children, who symbolize the powerless. There are radical sayings, about not causing other people to stumble in faith, that are strong words in order to make the points. Salt is a powerful metaphor of preservation and self-giving. Jesus instructs his disciples to be salty and at peace with one another.

#### **Chapter 10**

Jesus’s teachings on divorce show high regard for women. These teachings make it harder for the men of his day to divorce their wives. Jesus blesses little children. Stressing the hazards of wealth, he tells a rich person that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter heaven. He counterbalances that thought with the assurance that with God all things are possible. On the road, which is a metaphor for discipleship, Jesus tells of his death for a third time. He heals a blind man named Bartimaeus, saying that the man’s faith made him well.

5. Harrington, *How to Read the Gospels*, 26.

6. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 140.

## **Chapters 11–12**

Jesus's entering Jerusalem is a turning point of Mark's gospel. Jesus enters Jerusalem on the day that Christians call Palm Sunday. He cleans the temple and speaks about the power to move mountains. In chapter 12, Jesus addresses the issue of taxes and amazes people with his instructions to give the emperor those things that are his, and to give God the things that belong to God. Jesus addresses questions about the resurrected life. Writing with texture, Mark tells us that Jesus says to an inquiring scribe: that the first commandment is to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. The scribe then realizes the truth in the Old Testament passage, Hosea 6:6. In summary, this passage, which was part Jesus's sacred Scriptures, states that love of neighbor is more important than burnt offerings. Jesus says to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34).

## **Chapter 13**

The kingdom of God will come completely in the fullness of God's own time. This chapter, which is sometimes called "the little apocalypse," stresses the future aspects of the kingdom. No one really knows what the reader is to understand by *desolating sacrilege*. However, in any age when the present is bleak, watchfulness and accountability are dimensions of hopefulness. Mark 13 is a blend of Jesus's sayings and the thoughts of leaders in the first-century church. So this chapter is as much about the people of the first-century church as it is about the future. Discipleship is a major theme, and persecution is predicted. Yet the followers of Jesus could find hope through belief in future vindication.

## **Chapter 14**

Two days before the Passover, a few leaders look for a way to arrest and kill Jesus. An unnamed woman in Bethany anoints Jesus with costly ointment. The disciples criticize her, but Jesus says that she has performed a "good service" (NRSV) or, in another translation, "a beautiful thing" for him (NIV). In the upper room, the disciples join Jesus for the Passover. Jesus tells them that one of them will betray him. They commune in the breaking of bread, and go into the garden of Gethsemane to pray. Jesus prays, asking for whatever God wants. In keeping with the theme of fulfillment of the Scriptures, Judas betrays Rabbi Jesus with a kiss of identification. Peter also denies Jesus and weeps.

## Chapter 15

Jesus responds wisely to Pilate. Jesus stands before Pilate answering the question of whether or not he is the King of the Jews with the ambiguous statement: “You say so.” He is handed over to be crucified. Quoting from Psalm 22, Jesus on the cross asks, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Scholars disagree over whether or not readers are to conclude that because the rest of the psalm includes words of confidence in God’s vindication that Jesus knew that ultimately he was not forsaken.<sup>7</sup>

In verse 38, the curtain of the temple is torn in two—possibly symbolizing that God’s presence is no longer hidden. All people have access to God in a dawning new age. The study notes in the HarperCollins Study Bible state that the words *was torn* perhaps means the temple’s eradication and unmediated access to God created by Jesus’s death.<sup>8</sup>

In the centerpiece or focal point of the passion story, the centurion confesses that truly this man is God’s son. Some women who had followed Jesus do not abandon him. Joseph of Arimathea, a good man and respected member of the council, buries him.

## Chapter 16

Three women are there for Jesus and visit the tomb, finding it empty. A young man wearing a white robe explains that Jesus has been raised. Amazement and terror fill the women, who remain silent. The longer ending rounds out Mark’s gospel with postresurrection stories that are a collage formed from incidents in the other gospels. This composite closing ends with a call to go into the world and proclaim the good news.

## The World in Front of the Text

Jesus experienced rejection, and many other people have also been rejected or have known someone who has not found acceptance. Do you have ideas about how to embrace your own pain from rejection or how to help other people who are outside circles of concern?

If you have access to the book *Medieval Art: Painting–Sculpture–Architecture, 4th–14th Century*, by James Snyder, find a picture of Mark that captures his personality.<sup>9</sup> The picture is *Saint Mark*, which is an illustration in the Gospel Book of Ebbo. Mark looks heavenward at a lion and seems to be in an inspired, emotional trance. Swirling lines in his robe

7. *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 8:723.

8. *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 1950.

9. Snyder, *Medieval Art: Painting–Sculpture–Architecture, 4th–14th Century*, 217.



*The Gospel according to Mark*

and a cascading waterfall in the background suggest spiritual intensity. Mark's fingers rest on an open book as if God wanted him to either write his gospel or find meaningful biblical passages in the Hebrew Scriptures.

SAMPLE