

# Mark's Portrait of Jesus

## Mark 1:1-7

It was a day that would live in infamy. Not September 11th, 2001 or December 7th, 1941, but Summer of AD 64: The Great Fire of Rome. If you were alive during that time, it would have had the sort of shock value that we all experienced in our own national tragedy. Before then, Christian was growing, but thought of as another religious dish in the Empire Cafeteria of ideas. The fire changed everything. It was blamed on the spread of this sect called The Way, those followers of the Nazarene. It was then that things got real serious about Christianity. True Faith had to be defined like never before. Who was this Jesus and what does He ask of His followers? What does it mean to be a follower of His?

Those are the questions we want to ask as today we begin a verse by verse study through the Gospel of Mark. In our Bible we have four accounts of Jesus' life. Each of the Gospel accounts are unique and different, yet they all four proclaim the good news of the Savior Jesus Christ.

Mark may have been the first of these gospel accounts to be written. Mark 1:1 says **"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."** So right away we know that this account tells the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mark is the shortest of the four gospel accounts. It has only 16 chapters, that include a total of 662 verses, Matthew contains 551 of the same verses as Mark. In fact, Mark has only 51 verses that are unique to his gospel that are not found in either Matthew or Luke. So what is so unique about Mark? It is not so much what Mark records for us of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus that is so unique, but it is the way that he presents Jesus that is special.

Mark is sometimes called the gospel of action. It is a fast paced narrative. Mark uses the word *eutheos* 40 times in 16 chapters. Our English Bibles translate this word as "immediately," "straightway," or "at once." In Mark, Jesus is constantly on the move. One of the words which characterize Mark's story is the word "way" or "road." In Mark it seems like Jesus is often on the road, he is always on his way somewhere. He is on the move and he is always moving on the way to one destination, one goal—the cross. And Jesus calls disciples to follow him on the way, the way of the cross. Mark give us a lot of short episodes in the ministry of Jesus, healing the sick, driving out demons, raising the dead—Jesus is always doing something in the gospel of Mark.

One interesting thing about Mark narrative is that even though Matthew and Luke have a lot of the same content as Mark, and they basically follow the same outline, Mark includes several details that the other gospels leave out. His gospel has the marks of an eyewitness, like the person who wrote it was actually there and experienced these events. So who wrote this gospel?

## The Author: John Mark

The title of the book is *The Gospel According to Mark*. Although there is no direct evidence of the authorship of Mark in his gospel, the early church was unanimous in testifying that Mark wrote it. The most important evidence comes from an early church father named Papias the Bishop of Hierapolis in AD 140, who quotes an even earlier source as saying that: "Mark became Peter's interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered." The conclusion we draw from this tradition is that the Gospel of Mark largely consists of the preaching of Peter arranged and shaped by John Mark. It is interesting to note that the outline of Mark's Gospel parallels remarkably with Peter's sermon preaching Christ in Acts chapter 10.

I believe that it was Mark's close relationship with the apostle Peter which motivated and enabled him to write the intimate portrait of Christ that we have in these sixteen chapters of Mark's Gospel. We know from 1 Peter 5:13 that Mark and Peter were together in Rome in later years. We also know that Peter was intending, before his own death, to make a permanent record of his memories of Christ. If we read 2 Peter 1:15-16, he says there: **"Moreover I will be careful to ensure that you always have a reminder of these things after my decease. For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."** So what we have in Mark's Gospel is probably the memory of the apostle Peter concerning our Lord. This is why the gospel of Mark is so vivid and real—it was told to Mark by one who had been there.

So who was Mark? Mark is found in the book of Acts and in both Peter's and Paul's letters. His name is first mentioned in Acts 12:12 where it says that when Peter was rescued from jail, **"he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying."** So the Jerusalem church met in Mark's house. John Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas, his cousin, on their first missionary journey. But he deserted them part-way through the mission, and turned back to go home to Jerusalem. Paul was so deeply disappointed by Mark's actions that he refused to take him on the next mission. Although later, Paul has positive things to say about Mark in his letters (Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11).

It is interesting that the Holy Spirit chose this man, an unfaithful servant, to record for us the faithfulness of the Servant of God, the Lord Jesus.

## **The Outline: Jesus The Servant**

There are a number of ways that you can outline the Gospel of Mark. If we look at the book geographically, we come up with an outline according to where Jesus was when these events took place. This would look like:

The Servant's Ministry in Galilee 1:14-6:13

The Servant's Ministry Outside of Galilee 6:14-8:26

The Servant's Journey to Jerusalem 8:27-10:52

The Servant's Death and Resurrection in Jerusalem 11:1-16:8

## The Center Verse: 8:27, Who Is Jesus?

The center verse of the book – the book's bulls-eye is 8:27. Jesus asks, **"Who do men say that I am?"** Mark's purpose in writing this gospel is to show us who Jesus is. So as we read and study this book over the next few months, keep asking, "Who is Jesus?" Because how you answer that question will determine who you will be. This is the unavoidable dividing line that everyone must face...Who is Jesus? Your answer puts you on the side of belief or unbelief!

## The Theme: Jesus the Servant of God

The whole Gospel is summed up for us in chapter 10 verse 45 when Jesus gives His mission statement: **"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."**

Mark presents Jesus as the Son of God who is the servant of God. His emphasis is on Jesus as the servant who gives His life to redeem people.

In chapter 1:1-13 Mark gives us the credentials of the servant. Following that is the ministry of the servant, from chapter 1:14, to chapter 8, verse 30. The rest of the book is concerned with the ransoming work of the servant.

The first thirteen verses set up what is to come and gives us the a clue as to who Jesus is. 1:1 says **"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."** So right away Mark points us to the purpose of his writing. First, he writes a *gospel*. Gospel literally means good news. This story of Jesus is good news.

We all like to get good news. "It's a boy!" "You've just won \$1 million in the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes!" "I just saved a bundle of money on my car insurance by switching to GEICO!"

Have you ever had some news that you have been absolutely bursting to tell someone? Something good had happened and you were not able to rest until you had told somebody, perhaps it did not matter who you told, anybody would do? Maybe you had discovered that you were going to be a parent or a grandparent, or you had got a new job.

That's the feeling we get from Mark as he shares this good news. It's exciting! The gospel is the one story that has the power of God to bring people to salvation and eternal life. The gospel is not just aimed at informing, but transforming. It has the power to change your life. Paul said, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."** (Rom. 1:16).

Mark says it is the gospel of *Jesus Christ*. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ that we proclaim. Now we know what the good news is about. It is about Jesus the Christ. Only three times Mark is the word Christ used. Here at the introduction; 8:29 at Peter's confession; and 14:61 at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin. Each of these places are turning points in the gospel story. 1:1 marks the beginning of the gospel. Peter's confession marks the division of Jesus' ministry and Mark's

gospel and 14:61 marks the claim of Jesus to be the messiah, which led inevitably to his death.

Also in this first verse Mark tells us that Jesus is the Son of God. Again, three times in the gospel of Mark we see this clearly communicated. At Jesus' baptism the voice of the Father speaks and says, "**You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.**" In Chapter 9 Jesus took Peter, James and John up on a mountain where he was changed before their eyes and glowed with his heavenly glory. Again that voice said, "**This is My beloved Son. Hear Him!**" (9:7). Finally there is one person in the gospel of Mark who confesses that Jesus is the Son of God. It happens not when Jesus is performing miracles or driving out demons or teaching his disciples. This powerful confession occurs at the cross when the centurion who stood there and saw how Jesus died proclaimed, "**Truly this Man was the Son of God!**" (15:39). Jesus is most clearly seen as the Son of God in his sacrificial death on the cross.

Back to chapter 1, Mark then elaborates on Jesus' credentials. John the Baptist, prepares the way for Jesus and then baptizes him. Jesus receives the Father's seal of approval in the voice from heaven and then is immediately sent into the desert and tempted by Satan.

The very first thing that we see Jesus doing in his ministry is the calling of disciples. The gospel of Mark stresses discipleship. Discipleship is following Jesus, "**Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men.**" (1:17). At once (immediately) Simon and Andrew left their nets and followed Jesus. The same with James and John (1:20). Following Jesus takes active obedience. It is not something that we can do lying down. We must get up from where we are and go with Jesus. You cannot stay where you are and go with Jesus. He is always on the way, on the move. And if you want to be a disciple of Jesus you have to follow Him where he is going.

But beware, be forewarned, the place where Jesus is going is to the cross. And those who would be His followers must take up their cross and follow Him. Jesus will not settle for anything less. The gospel of Mark is a message for disciples. But you cannot be a disciple of Jesus unless you know Jesus and follow him. Mark show us who Jesus is and what it means to follow him.

Mark shows us that to follow Jesus we must see him as the Son of God, the faithful servant. Mark particularly emphasizes the actions of the Lord Jesus as opposed to the words of the Saviour. For instance, there are 19 miracles in Mark's Gospel but there are only four parables - and, incidentally, all of those four parables have to do with service as their theme.

## **The Purpose**

Now let me say a couple of things concerning his purpose in writing this Gospel. The first purpose I believe he had was to make the good news accessible to Gentiles. This, if you like, is a missionary book. Mark's Gospel is a Gospel that was written, and you find that it omitted what we would call 'insider language'. He uses Roman terms because he's writing to Gentile people in a Roman world. He

explains Aramaic words, that is the language spoken in the day of Jesus, because Gentiles wouldn't have understood it. Incidentally, there's a scarcity of Old Testament quotations in Mark's Gospel - because Gentiles would not have been familiar with Old Testament Scriptures. Now, if I had the time, we could take a lot of lessons in our evangelism out of the fact that Mark's Gospel was to make the good news accessible to those who were not insiders, to those who had never heard - you work that out for yourself.

Secondly, his purpose was to be an apologist of the cross of Jesus. In other words, he wants to set forth the significance of Jesus' death, explaining it. Mark, as you find, and we will as we go through it week by week, he wants to make clear that the death of Jesus was not a tragic accident, but it was part of God's plan from the very beginning. Jesus knew He was going to die, and indeed He told His disciples that He was going to die, even though they misunderstood Him. So what Mark wants to set forth is that God chose to bring His kingdom to bear through the shameful death of His chosen Servant - now that was a great stumbling block, not only to the Jew but to the Gentile: that Messiah should die in shame, that He should not only come as a Servant, but die on a cross as a criminal. The Greek mind and the Roman mind could not conceive of how a Saviour could die for others in such shame and ignominy, and then arise again. The preaching of the cross was a stumbling block, and so Mark wants to set forth an explanation of why He was to die.

His third purpose was to encourage those who were facing persecution, Christians who were facing persecution. Now if Peter was the source for the information in Mark's Gospel, as we believe, it's very likely that Mark's Gospel was written in Rome. We know that it was from Rome that great persecution of Christians came by Nero in AD 64 - and that many Christians, probably including Paul and Peter, died for their faith during Nero's reign. So Mark's Gospel seems to be aimed at Christians who were not just facing persecution, but going to face even worse persecution in the days that lie ahead. So what Mark is doing here is preparing them, he is telling them of the Christ who suffered and how He suffered, and how it was predicted that He would suffer. The One who you worship suffered, He was ordained to suffer, He came to suffer, but through His suffering your redemption has been bought - and you will suffer, but you are suffering in the line of your Savior.

That's why John Mark is arranging his material the way he does: he wants to show us Christ as the One who speaks, the One who acts and delivers in the midst of crises. In every age, whether you live under Neronian persecutions or whether you live in the 21st-century America of affluence and pleasure crazed society - in every age, in every circumstance the Christian needs to get a fresh focus on Christ.

I want to ask you today: have you lost focus of Him? My reason for embarking upon this study of Mark's Gospel is that we as God's people again will get taken up by seeing Jesus!

How does Mark portray Jesus? He came not to be served, but to serve and give His life a ransom for many. As such, Christ is the Christ of the crisis, but He's all action in the crisis - and that's why, in Mark's Gospel, Mark uses the historical present tense 15 times: Jesus comes, not 'came', Jesus comes; Jesus says, not 'said', says; Jesus heals, not 'healed', heals - all in the present tense, what to communicate? To communicate that in the crisis of his life and the life of the disciples, He was active, He was busy, He was instrumental, He was moving, He was doing. In the same way in our crisis, in our persecution, in our difficulties: Christ is still being our Servant.

R. Kent Hughes says: "It takes a slow reader about two hours to read Mark through at a single sitting. If you take the time, you feel surrounded by the crowds, wearied by demands and besieged by the attacks of demons." It's all about how Christ served - but the big question is: what does it mean to us?

Hughes tells a story about one of the world renowned scholars of the classics, Dr E .V. Rieu. He completed a great translation of Homer into modern English for Penguin Classics. Because his translation was so popular, Penguin publishers later approached him again and asked him to translate the Gospels from the Greek. Dr. Rieu was not a believer, he was an agnostic. Can you imagine this: an agnostic classical scholar being asked to translate Matthew, Mark, Luke and John! Now, when Rieu's son heard about this, he was heard to say, "*It will be interesting to see what father will make of the four Gospels*", then he paused, "*It will be even more interesting to see what the four Gospels make of father.*" He didn't have to wonder very long - within a year's time E.V. Rieu, the lifelong agnostic, responded to the Gospels. As he translated them he faced Christ, and he became a committed Christian. His story is a testimony to the transforming power of opening up of God's word.