

Mark's Gospel

Mark's gospel was probably written by "John also called Mark" whose mother had a house in Jerusalem. He accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, where Paul got angry with him because of his unreliability (Acts 12:12,25; 13:5,13; 15:37). Afterwards, though, he was reconciled to Paul and helped him in his ministry in Rome (2 Timothy 4:11). It is also probable that Mark is the young man mentioned in Mark 14:51-52 as being present at the arrest of Jesus. There seems no other reason for these verses.

The stories and teaching which Mark has assembled probably came from the apostle Peter. The gospel would have been a summary of Peter's teaching, made at a time when he was facing possible death. The stories have the immediacy and vividness of eyewitness recollection. But Mark has also done a very careful job of arrangement. He begins with Jesus' public ministry, following the course of his travels to their most northerly point at Caesarea Philippi near the Mediterranean coast. Here Peter recognises Jesus as Messiah and Jesus immediately responds with a prediction of his coming suffering and death. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus appears to his disciples in glory at the Transfiguration and then begins his journey to Jerusalem and his crucifixion. The Passion Story, the account of his last week in Jerusalem, ending with the resurrection, takes up more than a third of the length of the book.

Day 43. Psalm 145; Mark 1:1 - 2:22

The Impact of Jesus

Psalm 145

A celebration of the character of God and his mighty acts. In Jesus, God's righteousness and compassion were displayed and his Kingdom of love and justice came near.

Mark 1:1-20

In the first sentence, Mark announces the subject of his book, the "gospel". For his readers, "gospel" meant not good news of any kind, but more particularly the news of God's coming reign (see Isaiah 52:7). Straight away Mark gives Jesus his most important titles: the Christ and Son of God. These titles sum up what Christians believed about Jesus and the gospel was written to vindicate their claim to use them of him.

A contrast is made between John's baptism and that of Jesus; while John's is for repentance only, Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit. He is the one through whom the hope will be fulfilled of the outpouring of the Spirit on all God's people (see Numbers 11:29; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29) This hope begins with Jesus himself receiving the baptism of the Spirit, who becomes the source of his authority and direction in ministry.

Jesus then goes on to preach. The proclamation in 1:14-15 is intended as a summary of his message. Like John the Baptist, Jesus also called the people of his time to repent, and announced that the Kingdom of heaven was "at hand" or "drawing near". His whole ministry was a foretaste of the effect of God's kingly rule in people's lives.

Jesus also calls disciples who "follow" him. They become typical followers and throughout the Gospel readers are invited to identify with them. Here, they leave their nets to be with Jesus. Notice that from the very first they are partners with Jesus in his mission (1:17).

Mark 1:21-39

1:21-39 may describe a typical Sabbath day early in the ministry with attendance at the synagogue, teaching and healing, followed by an early start to find time alone in prayer with God the Father. The first impression made by Jesus is of authority, displayed in his teaching and in the casting out of demons. From the first, the demons know who Jesus is, but Jesus wants his true identity to remain a secret.

Mark 1:40 - 2:22

Right from the start, Jesus rejects the way of easy popularity. Instead, he begins to cross the boundaries of Jewish religious belief and practice. He touches a man who is unclean because of his skin disease; offers forgiveness of sins, something only God could do, to a man in need of healing; then calls a notorious sinner to be his disciple and goes to eat with outcasts. The new wine he has come to bring cannot be contained in the old wineskins (2:21-22)

Day 44. Psalm 57; Mark 2:23 - 4:34

The Demand of Jesus

Psalm 57

The writer is on the receiving end of a barrage of criticism, but takes refuge in the praise of God.

Mark 2:23 - 4:34

In these early chapters are several verses which summarise the rapidly developing situation in Jesus' teaching ministry. First, he comes into Galilee preaching the good news (1:14-15); he travels throughout Galilee (1:35-39); the crowds force him to stay outside the towns (1:45); he begins to challenge the assumptions of the religious leaders (2:8); until finally he is propelled into open conflict with them (3:6).

2:1 - 3:6 is a group of stories charting the progress of the conflict. By placing it at the beginning of the gospel, Mark shows that it began early on. Jesus crossed the boundaries of Jewish belief and practice: touching lepers, offering forgiveness of sins, calling a tax-collector, accepting the hospitality of outcasts, and finally breaking the Sabbath. The Pharisees interpreted plucking grain in the fields as reaping and therefore a violation of the Sabbath. Jesus recalls an incident when David was in flagrant breach of the Law because the needs of his men came first. The Pharisees' interpretation of the Law ignores its whole purpose, which is to serve human needs.

Beneath the surface, Mark gives us a glimpse of the Jesus' feelings: compassion (1:41), anger and distress (3:5). In 3:1-6 he encounters a case of real human need where the Law as interpreted by the Pharisees only hindered him from helping. Throughout his ministry, Jesus combined argument (2:8-11,19-22,25-28; 3:4) with deep feeling. In response to the plot against him, Jesus withdraws (3:7) and chooses disciples who will share the ministry with him. The first part of their task was simply to be with Jesus (3:14); only then would they be sent out.

The conclusion to the first stage of these arguments comes in 3:20-30. What is really going on? Is Jesus mad or possessed or is he taking on the forces of evil and defeating them? The teachers of the law think they have a right to sit in judgement on Jesus, but in fact by failing to recognise the Kingdom of God in action they bring a judgement on themselves far more serious (3:28-30).

The parables take up the theme of judgement present in the proclamation of the Kingdom. When Jesus preaches it is necessary to hear with faith (4:24-25). His method of using stories which challenge the hearers means that those without faith fail to understand the message. The quotation from Isaiah 6:9-10 emphasises this point. In that passage, God tells Isaiah that his preaching will act like a judgement on Israel, since they will *hear* his words but fail to *heed* them. Only a small number, a "remnant" will be saved. The effect of Jesus' ministry of teaching and healing will be to bring judgement on Israel while separating out a small number who put their faith in him. But from those small beginnings, great things will grow (4:20,26-32).

Day 45. Psalm 103; Mark 4:35 - 6:29

The Response to Jesus

Psalm 103

A celebration of God's rule of compassion and grace, the characteristics demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus.

Mark 4:35 - 6:29

A man who speaks and acts with authority demands a response. In the earlier chapters, Mark shows Jesus' authority as a teacher, over evil spirits and disease, and in his claim to forgive sins. In this passage Jesus demonstrates his authority over the forces of nature (4:39) and over death (5:39-42).

His authority raises the question of just who Jesus is. Nowhere does he openly claim to be the Messiah. It is only the demons who know all about him (5:7). These chapters show us a variety of responses to Jesus in preparation for Peter's declaration of faith at Caesarea Philippi (8:29). The teachers of the Law (3:22-30) and his own family (3:31-end) fail to believe in him. The disciples wonder at Jesus' authority over the elements, but they don't know who he is either (4:40-41).

The theme of faith, already introduced at 2:5, now comes to the fore. First, faith in Jesus is the way to healing. On the way to Jairus' house, a vast crowd presses upon Jesus and jostles him, but the only one healed is the one who touches him with faith (5:28,34). Faced with the death of his daughter, Jesus challenges Jairus to put his faith in him, and later puts the unbelieving mourners outside.

Secondly, faith is required to recognise who Jesus is. At Nazareth, where there is little faith, he can do only a few miracles (6:5-6). Presumably the inhabitants are too familiar with Jesus to recognise in him anything special (6:2-4). Finally Herod sees no more in Jesus than John the Baptist restored to life (6:16). The various opinions canvassed in 6:14-15 anticipate the answer the disciples give to Jesus' question at 8:27-28.

Jesus has been preparing his disciples to be sent out (3:14). In Gentile country, he tells the restored demoniac to tell his friends what the Lord had done for him (5:19-20). Now, in 6:6-13 the disciples are sent out to preach with authority over evil spirits. They return at 6:30. The mission of the Twelve during Jesus' lifetime is a sign of what is to come after the resurrection.

The death of John the Baptist is a sign of what is to come for Jesus. His ministry began when that of John the Baptist was brought to an end by his imprisonment (1:14) Jesus recognised John as the forerunner to his own coming (9:11-13). He must also have recognised that John's fate was likely to be his too.

Day 46. Psalm 40; Mark 6:30 - 8:21

The Teaching of Jesus

Psalm 40

The writer sets his heart to obey God and asks God to deliver him from his own failings and the hostility of others.

Mark 6:30 - 8:21

Jesus' public ministry in Galilee is ending and he begins to retreat northwards from Galilee, perhaps because of the threat from the religious authorities and also from Herod, who suspected Jesus of being a resurrected John the Baptist (6:16; 8:15). His attempts to avoid publicity, such as taking the men brought to him for healing aside (7:33; 8:23), are continually frustrated (6:31-33, 7:24,31,36, 8:10,13).

In this section, the image of food is used for teaching or spiritual feeding. Like the prophet in Isaiah 55:1-13, Jesus is the provider of abundant and satisfying food, far better than the teaching they have previously been subjected to, the teaching of the Pharisees.

Mark contrasts Jesus' teaching and that of the Pharisees directly in the passage on tradition in chapter 7, but this is carefully and deliberately placed between the two great feeding miracles. In 6:34 Jesus encounters a large crowd which he likens to sheep without a shepherd. This means that the Pharisees, who should have been the shepherds, have failed and Jesus responds both by teaching the crowd himself and later by demonstrating the coming of the Kingdom with miracles of healing (6:53-56). When it emerges that the crowd have no food, Jesus tells the disciples to feed them. They have just returned from a teaching mission (6:30) but they fail to understand what he means, so Jesus performs the first feeding miracle. Their dullness over the feeding is emphasised when they fail to understand the significance of Jesus' walking on the lake (6:51-52).

Then follows the direct confrontation with the Pharisees over the Law. Their rules of behaviour stress outward conformity rather than inward holiness (7:14-23). Their teachings are not from God but based on human tradition (7:6-8) and nullify the word of God (7:13). The message of this whole section, based on the authority of Jesus already shown from 1:22 onwards, is that the teaching that Jesus brings makes the tradition of the Pharisees redundant (7:19).

From 7:24 Jesus enters Gentile country. Here again, there is an important conversation about food. The Gentile woman insists that the crumbs from the children's table may also be eaten by (Gentile) dogs (7:27-28). The healing of the deaf and dumb man, the crowd's reaction (7:37) and the feeding of the four thousand symbolically show the teaching of Jesus available to the Gentiles.

The conversation in the boat provides a conclusion to the section emphasising the symbolic meaning of the feeding miracles. The "leaven" of the Pharisees is their unbelief, showed again in the demand for a sign (8:11-12). In contrast the food Jesus gives is abundant and satisfying (8:19-21; see Isaiah 55:1-3). However, at this stage the disciples still do not understand (6:52; 7:18; 8:17).

Day 47 Psalm 146; Mark 8:22 - 9:29

Caesarea Philippi

Psalm 146

The gracious and compassionate rule of the Lord.

Mark 8:22 - 9:29

The story of the blind man at Bethsaida (8:22-26) marks the beginning of a new section of the gospel, which ends with the story of another blind man in 10:46-end. In this section Jesus withdraws from public attention and concentrates on teaching his disciples (9:30-31). But the disciples are like the first of the two blind men. Previously they had been completely blind (4:41; 8:17-21) but now they see partially (8:32-33; 9:28-29,33-34,38; 10:13,24,32,35-37). In particular, this section includes three predictions by Jesus of his coming suffering and death, none of which the disciples understand (8:31-32; 9:30-32; 10:32-38).

At Caesarea Philippi, Peter at last recognises Jesus as the Messiah. But straight away Jesus has to begin to teach his disciples that he will not be the kind of Messiah they expect, and that being his followers will not be what they expect either. For us as for Jesus, suffering is to precede glory.

Here, as in many places, the Gospel shows clearly how it was written as a teaching manual for the contemporary church. Mark is pointing a lesson for contemporary disciples of Jesus. We may believe in Jesus as the Christ but fail to recognise his vocation as the suffering Son of Man. In the events of Caesarea Philippi the themes of Jesus' suffering and glory are brought together. He is the Christ, the Son of God, and his disciples behold his glory on the Mount of the Transfiguration, but his call from God is to suffer and die. Likewise, the followers of the suffering Messiah must be prepared to suffer themselves before they see the kingdom of God come with power (8:34 - 9:1).

After the glimpse of glory at the Transfiguration, Peter James and John come face to face with failure, opposition, unbelief and shaky belief (9:14,19,24). Mark is showing us that any "mountaintop experience" in Christian life has to be followed by descent into the valley of the everyday. But Jesus is Lord in these situations also.

Day 48. Psalm 25; Mark 9:30 - 10:end

The Journey to Jerusalem

Psalm 25

The ways of the Lord are a way of life. The writer is aware of his own problems and failings, but his desire is to follow the Lord's way.

Mark 9:30 - 10:end

As Jesus made his final journey to Jerusalem, he concentrated on teaching his disciples the way of life appropriate to the Kingdom of God (9:31). His teaching is punctuated by reminders of his approaching death (9:30-32, 10:32-34,45). Its theme is the kind of community the Christian Church is to be, one which reflects the character of Jesus as Messiah.

Several of the teaching sections emphasise humility and servanthood (9:35), culminating in the great words of 10:42-45, where Jesus sums up his own vocation. There are to be no distinctions of status in the Kingdom. Children, who in Jesus day were considered unimportant, are to be welcomed (9:36-37; 10:13-16). There is to be no sectarianism, or separation into exclusive groups; no one who confesses the name of Jesus is to be excluded on the basis of some more rigorous test of affiliation (9:38-41).

Exaggeration and humour are techniques Jesus often used to emphasise his message and make it memorable. Reading passages like 9:42-48 it is necessary to imagine the tone of Jesus' voice as he says it. He is not recommending self-maiming, which would conflict with the demands of Christian stewardship! His point is the importance of avoiding sin. The same technique is used at 10:25.

In 10:1-12, Jesus leaves instructions for his followers on the question of divorce, but notice that while Jesus points the Pharisees to the original intention behind the institution of marriage, it is to the disciples that he enjoins the commitment to the permanence of marriage. This point is made even clearer in Matthew 19:1-12, where Jesus' words have been expanded to apply them to a wider range of situations.

Jesus' teaching on wealth is revolutionary. Like the Jews of their day, the disciples would have seen wealth as an indicator of God's approval. This is why they find Jesus' words hard to believe (10:26). In the Christian Church,

wealth is to be used in the service of the poor and/or renounced in favour of the eternal rewards which God gives (8:36; 10:21,29-31).

This section of the gospel is brought to an end by another story about a blind man, but this time one who shows what the disciples should be. The blind man at Bethsaida (8:21-26) with his period of partial seeing illustrates the disciples in this section. In contrast, Bartimaeus calls on Jesus by one of his Messianic titles. To James and John and to Bartimaeus, Jesus asks the same question: "What do you want me to do for you?" But whereas the brothers ask for status and power, Bartimaeus asks for his sight (10:36-37,51), calling Jesus "Rabboni" or "my teacher." And unlike the disciples, who hang back amazed (10:32), Bartimaeus follows Jesus on the road, the road that will soon lead to the cross (10:52).

Day 49. Psalm 24; Mark 11 - 12

The Week in Jerusalem

Psalm 24

A psalm for a procession into Jerusalem.

Mark 11 - 12

The "Passion Narrative", the account of the last week of Jesus' life from the triumphal entry into Jerusalem to the crucifixion and resurrection, takes up a large part of all the gospels. Its dominating theme is the collision between Jesus and the established religious system of the Jews, which eventually leads to his crucifixion. Jerusalem is to be judged for its failure to receive its Messiah. As Jesus enters the city, the words of the crowds emphasise their expectations of a triumphant, reigning Messiah. In fact, it is the beginning of the end for the religious authorities. The cursing of the fig tree (11:12-21) is a comment on the significance of the cleansing of the Temple, an acted parable on the fate of the fruitless religious system.

In 11:27-33 all sections of the leadership confront Jesus at once and refuse to accept his authority. Then follows a parable in which the tenants of the vineyard refuse to accept the authority of the owner. The vineyard was an established image for the Jewish nation (see Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:8-end; Jeremiah 2:21). As in previous chapters, there are hints of the inclusion of the Gentiles in God's people. The Jerusalem leaders have kept them out (11:17), but God will give them the vineyard (12:9).

Jesus then confronts the members of each of the dominant religious parties separately, and contradicts their fundamental assumptions. The Pharisees were popular with many of the Jews because they resisted co-operation with the pagan authorities. Their question was intended to put Jesus on the spot by forcing him to side either with the Romans or with popular opinion. The coin Jesus was shown would have referred to the emperor as "Lord", a title Jesus also claimed (11:3). The Sadducees, while co-operating with Rome, did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus refutes them from the Books of Moses, the only part of Scripture they took to be authoritative (12:26).

The question about the Law (12:28-34) demonstrates Jesus' positive position. He goes to the heart of the Law, the command to love God and to love one's neighbour. His argument from Psalm 110 shows where he stands in relation to the expected Messiah. Already he had claimed the donkey with the words,

"The Lord needs it" (11:3). But who is the Lord? The crowd expected him to restore the kingdom of David (11:10). But Jesus challenges their ideas of who "the Lord" is to be. He will not be a conquering king in the mould of David, but someone greater still.

Finally, Jesus condemns the teachers of the law for their hypocrisy and abuse of power. 12:38-40 is nicely contrasted with 12:41-44. While the wealthy and self-important teachers devour widows' houses, a poor widow gives to God everything she has.

Day 50. Psalm 56; Mark 13:1 - 14:42

Judgement on Jerusalem

Psalm 56

Under persecution, the writer commits his case to God.

Mark 13

This chapter is known as the "Little Apocalypse". It is a prophesy of judgement on Jerusalem (13:2,4). Jewish apocalyptic literature was a style of writing common around the time of Jesus and included, as a major theme, the "Messianic woes". This was a time of tribulation to be experienced by the Messianic community (the Jews), which would end with the intervention of the Messiah, who would destroy the enemies of the community and establish the Kingdom of God, in which the "saints (or "chosen") of the Most High" would rule (see Daniel 7:9-18). The theme is considerably expanded in other books in the Apocrypha to the Old Testament.

Against the background of this established expectation, Jesus makes the following points:

1. Jesus himself is the Messiah. It is he who receives the Kingdom (13:19-27; see Daniel 7:13-14).
2. The Messianic community is not the Jews but the Christians. They are the 'elect' (13:20,27) who undergo tribulation (13:6-13). Jesus warns them to flee from Jerusalem (13:14-18) and when the Romans attacked in 70 A.D. that is what the Christians in Jerusalem did. Hebrews 13:13-14 may be a similar warning.
3. Jerusalem is not to be saved, as the Jews expected, but destroyed (13:1-2, see 12:9-11).

Writing before the event, Mark may have expected the fall of Jerusalem to be the final catastrophe predicted in the apocalyptic writings. Thus, at 13:24 his account moves straight on to the end of the age. By the time the gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, Jerusalem had fallen and the end of the world had not come. The writers, and all Christians, had to think again about the Second Coming and the meaning of Jesus' words (see 2 Peter 3:8-10).

Mark 14:1-42

The development of the Jewish plot goes hand in hand with Jesus' awareness of it (14:8,18) and he takes care not to reveal the place of the Last Supper to Judas. It is not Judas' defection which is the cause of Jesus' death, but the will of God expressed in Scripture. Nevertheless, like Jerusalem, which was refusing its Messiah, the judgement on the renegade will be severe (14:21). The words over the bread and wine at supper bring to full expression previous hints that Jesus' suffering will be for the salvation of the world (14:22-25; see 10:45).

Jesus now faces the crisis of his life. If he compromises he may avoid death, but if he continues to preach and live the will of God he will be arrested. His choice is to remain faithful to God's will. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus takes on his own "Messianic woes" and asks Peter, James and John to watch with him. Their failure points us all to the need of greater fortitude in time of trial (14:37-38; see 13:35-37).

Day 51. Psalm 22:1-11; Mark 14:43 - 16:end

The Crucifixion and Resurrection

Psalm 22:1-11

Feeling alone and abandoned, a sufferer commits himself to God's care.

Mark 14:43 - 16:end

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus never directly claimed to be the Messiah; when Peter did recognise him, Jesus immediately warned the disciples not to tell anyone else (8:30). But when at his trial he is asked by the high priest whether he is the Messiah, the Son of God (see 1:1), he acknowledges both these titles and adds his own favourite description of himself, drawn from Daniel 7, the "Son of Man", the one who would come in power and great glory to rule over God's Kingdom (14:62; 13:26). Now, when the separation between those with faith and those who reject him is complete, is the time for open acknowledgement of his claim. But this is rejected by the Sanhedrin as blasphemy (14:63-64) and leads directly to his crucifixion. Thus, it is not just as a dangerous teacher or prophet that he is rejected by the Jewish leaders, but as God's chosen Messiah.

While Jesus is affirming his claims before the elders, chief priests and scribes combined against him (14:53), Peter fails to stand up to a servant girl (14:66) and, in direct contrast to his words at 8:29, denies Jesus (14:66-72). As in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus endures suffering, while the disciples fail.

At the trial before Pilate, a new title is introduced, "The King of the Jews." Again, Jesus acknowledges the title and under it he is crucified (15:2,9,12,18-20,26). The King is crucified while a rebel goes free (15:7), despite the fact that he has done nothing wrong (15:14). Thus, he is rejected as king by both Jews and Gentiles, one group angrily refusing him the title, the other mocking it.

At the moment of Jesus' death, he loses the sense of the presence of God which has been with him throughout his ministry (1:9-11,35; 6:45-46; 9:7; 14:36). But the moment of apparently greatest disaster and failure is in fact the same moment at which Jesus begins to win the world: the curtain of the Temple, which separated the holy place from the Holy of Holies where God dwelt, is torn in two, symbolising the removal of the barrier between God and mankind; the centurion believes and Joseph of Arimathea becomes bold. Joseph's request and the story of the women sets the scene for the resurrection which is to come.

16:9-20 is not present in any of the earliest manuscripts of the gospel. It was probably written later as a summary of the post-resurrection appearances. It may be that the original ending to the gospel has been lost, but it is also possible that Mark intended the gospel to finish on the note of wonder and fear in 16:8, emphasising the mystery of the resurrection. For the reader, the sequel to the empty tomb is not so much Jesus' resurrection appearances in Galilee, but his "appearance" in the heart of the believer.
