

The Gospel According to Mark

Lesson 1

Mark 1:1 – Mark 2:28

By far the shortest of all the eyewitness accounts, the Gospel according to Mark presents vivid word pictures of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of our Lord in rapid succession. From picture to picture the stories unfold, without transition sentences, fact after fact, with rarely an ounce of frill or flair. The author immediately strikes at the heart of each important story as he presses through an eyewitness account, but it is not his own.

Mark may have seen the Lord as a child, but he was far too young to remember the details; therefore, this manuscript records the eyewitness account of someone else. After the Lord's ascension, Peter became the leader of the Lord's followers. During one of his many imprisonments, an angel miraculously set Peter free. All the believers were gathered at Mark's mother's house to pray for Peter's release. Peter stopped at Mark's house first to bring comfort to the followers before going on his way. With regular meetings at his home, Mark had abundant opportunities to sit at the feet of Peter as well as the other apostles, to glean from their knowledge. Most likely, as a fisherman, Peter could not read or write. Mark became useful to Peter in his ministry, not only as his disciple, but also as his scribe. Their relationship became so close that Peter would call Mark his son. A well documented tradition states that Mark obtained all of his information for this gospel from the eyewitness account of Peter.

Peter primarily ministered to the Jews, so how can it be that Mark would write Peter's eyewitness account to a uniquely Roman audience? One clue can be found in Mark's family names. They called Mark's mother Mary, a distinctly Jewish name, but the name Mark or Marcus is Roman. Acts 12:12 and 25 reveal that Mark had another name too, John, another distinctly Jewish name in origin. From these facts we can conclude that John Mark was possibly the son of a Jewish mother and Roman father, but a look into history will reveal why Mark may have written this Gospel to the Romans.

In 47 AD, almost two decades after Calvary, we see Mark as a young man accompanying Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. During the trip Mark leaves the team, greatly disappointing Paul. Three years later Paul and Barnabas separate because Paul will not take Mark on the next trip. Much later, Paul and Mark reunite and ultimately find themselves imprisoned together in Rome. Finally, the last record of John Mark finds him in Ephesus with Timothy who has received a letter from Paul, who is in his second imprisonment in Rome. As evangelism of the Roman Empire expanded with Paul's ministry, the Lord prepared John Mark for the purpose of recording and publishing Peter's eyewitness account to them.

The context of this Gospel shows Mark targeting the Roman audience. This document leaves out Jewish references such as the Temple and the Law because they are unimportant to the Roman reader. Mark defines all necessary Jewish terms succinctly and moves quickly on to the next point in his narrative. As we will see, Mark opens the Gospel by summing up the entire purpose and ministry of John the Baptist in just eleven verses.

The Beginning of the Gospel

Mark 1: ¹The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Each of the gospel writers begin at a different place in the story of the Lord. Writing to the Romans, Mark begins with John the Baptist's baptizing the Lord at the Jordan River. Writing to the Jews, Matthew gives the entire ancestry beginning with Abraham. Writing to the Gentiles, Luke begins with the miraculous announcement and all the details surrounding the birth of John the Baptist and the Lord. Finally, John, writing to the church, begins with Jesus, the pre-incarnate Word of God. The writer of each gospel tailors his message to his intended audience. Unconcerned with the birth of John and the virgin birth of Jesus, the Roman audience needed to know only the connection of John's message with the Lord's message and the portrayal of Jesus' baptism, accompanied by the verbal affirmation of God the Father.

John the Baptist – And the Baptism of the Lord

Mark 1: ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER BEFORE YOUR FACE, WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY;" ³THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE READY THE WAY OF THE LORD, MAKE HIS PATHS STRAIGHT.' " ⁴ John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And all the country of Judea was going out to him, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were being baptized by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins.

The New Testament writers often combined quotations from various prophets in order to clarify their point. Mark combines the words of Malachi with those of Isaiah although he credits the entire passage to Isaiah. He uses the first part of Malachi's prophecy only since the mention of the temple and the covenant meant nothing to the Romans. Malachi says,

*"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts. **Malachi 3:1***

We need to understand that the apparent problem of quoting only a portion of a passage would not have been a problem for Mark since the copies of the text he drew from did not have chapters or verses. Mark simply pulled the portion of the sentence he wanted from Malachi and then added the following sentence from Isaiah.

*A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. **Isaiah 40:3***

Mark uses the words of Malachi and Isaiah to clearly state John's purpose and mission of coming to prepare the way for the Messiah. When asked by the Sanhedrin to explain who he was, John spoke the words of Isaiah, saying:

*"I am A VOICE OF ONE CRYING IN THE WILDERNESS, 'MAKE STRAIGHT THE WAY OF THE LORD,' as Isaiah the prophet said." **John 1:23***

John's appearance in the wilderness represents no small everyday event in Israel; his appearance stands as a monumental fulfillment of prophecy. His message, simple and to the point, proclaims the need to repent and seek forgiveness of sin and to declare it to the world through the symbol of baptism. Romans knew nothing about baptism, so Mark quickly moves through this section to explain that his message captured the attention of all the Jews, drawing them out of their cities to see this prophet at the Jordan River, a phenomenon in that day. We must ask the question, "if the Romans knew nothing about this type of baptism, did the Jews understand its purpose?" Jews clearly understood the "process," but perhaps not John's purpose for the baptism. When a Gentile wanted to worship as a Jew, the Jewish leadership baptized him into the Jewish religion, so, for the most part, the people understood the symbol of baptism. The issue in John's message struck at the heart of the entire Jewish nation and religion because he treated all of them as reprobates who needed to repent and confess their sins in order to get back to the true work of God's kingdom. When John challenged the people to be baptized for the repentance of their sins, he forthrightly challenged the entire Jewish faith and practice. Many, tired of the ritualistic system, confessed their sins and allowed this strange looking man to baptize them in the Jordan River. Mark describes John as follows:

Mark 1: ⁶And John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and his diet was locusts and wild honey. ⁷And he was preaching, and saying, "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. ⁸"I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

Patterned after the garb of Elijah (2 Kings 1:8), John's clothing, woven from the hair of camels along with his belt and diet, distinguished him and likened him to a prophet of old, unique in his day, but not unique in Jewish history. As for his diet, the straight-winged locusts resemble our grasshopper, but much larger than we see today. John did not break the Mosaic Law by eating these creatures; it declares them clean and lawful to eat in Leviticus 11:22. As for the honey, Bedouins today still supplement their income by gathering it from the caves in Israel. For six months John preached his message and baptized those who repented of their sins as he prepared the way for the Messiah. John's ability to draw huge crowds astounded all onlookers. His popularity frightened and threatened the government and the religion of Israel. But John's message clearly and regularly declared the coming of One greater than he, a message which stirred the interest of everyone, holding them in suspense as they awaited this great One's arrival. The great One would baptize too, not with water, but with the Holy Spirit, indicating that John's baptism only symbolizes the baptism of the One who would soon come. One day, Jesus came to the river for His baptism. Mark includes this point because the Romans will need to follow with this same symbol when they put their faith and trust in the Gospel message. The stage is now set for the arriving of the Lord at the Jordan River.

The Trinity at the Jordan River

Mark 1: ⁹And it came about in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee, and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And immediately coming up

out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; ¹¹and a voice came out of the heavens: "Thou art My beloved Son, in Thee I am well-pleased."

Mark says nothing about the interaction between Jesus and John before the baptism takes place because it adds nothing to the story for the Roman reader. The event that took place as Jesus emerged from the river and the presence of God in all three persons is different because it will stand paramount in the Gospel message to the Romans. The sinless Jesus has identified with sinful mankind and become the model that all should follow. The sky split like a garment as Jesus broke the water's surface, the Holy Spirit descended through the air, and the voice of the Father rang in the ears of all present. The scene represents another point in God's continuing revelation, connecting the three persons of God with the Lord's forthcoming act of redemption. The earthly ministry of the Lord begins at His baptism and concludes at the ascension. For now, His next destination is the wilderness.

Jesus in the wilderness

Mark 1: ¹²And immediately the Spirit impelled Him to go out into the wilderness. ¹³And He was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and He was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to Him.

The Holy Spirit descended on the Lord at His baptism for the purpose of leading the Lord from the baptismal waters into the wilderness for forty days. The Spirit controlled the entire wilderness experience of the Lord, not to mention every other aspect of His earthly life, from His immaculate conception to His resurrection from the grave. Forty days of preparation ensued before the time of temptation by Satan. Matthew's gospel gives more details concerning this event, facts important to the Jewish readers but not to Mark's Roman audience. Therefore, Mark only mentions the wilderness experience without offering a clear chronological detail as seen in Matthew chapter 4. During the time in the wilderness, the angels constantly attended to His wellbeing. They continued to be with Him during Satan's three temptations as well. After these experiences, Mark's gospel takes Jesus to Galilee.

John in custody, Jesus in Galilee

Mark 1: ¹⁴And after John had been taken into custody, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, ¹⁵and saying, "**The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.**"

Mark starts with the Galilean ministry because it coincides with the call of Peter to follow the Lord. It is at this point that Peter's life with the Lord and his eyewitness account begins. Matthew and Luke will follow the same outline in their Gospels. If the apostle John had not written his Gospel, we would not have known about the Lord's twelve to eighteen months of ministry conducted in Perea, Galilee, Judea and Samaria prior to this point in the story. John the Baptist's imprisonment happened, in part, because of the departure of the Lord from the area. The apostle John records the following:

*When therefore the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John (although Jesus Himself was not baptizing, but His disciples were), He left Judea, and departed again into Galilee. **John 4:1-3***

The words of Jesus echo the message of John the Baptist - repent and believe in the gospel. John's work on earth nears its end and Jesus moves on to Galilee to allow the fulfillment of John's fate. Time has come for Jesus to call some specific men who will carry on His work after His departure, and they are not from the established religious institution.

The calling of Simon and Andrew

¹⁶And as He was going along by the Sea of Galilee, He saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon, casting a net in the sea; for they were fishermen. ¹⁷And Jesus said to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men."

¹⁸And they immediately left the nets and followed Him.

Jesus finds the brothers at their business of fishing in the sea. He calls for them and they follow Him. He has a big chore ahead, making fishers of men out of fishers of the sea – one, a lonely business, the other, a people business. Here Jesus formally calls the two brothers to follow Him. They had followed John the Baptist and earlier Andrew had gone to find his brother to tell him about Jesus as recorded in John 1:40. The Romans do not need to know about the earlier encounters with the Lord, so the formal call rests as enough information in this passage.

The calling of James and John

Mark 1: ¹⁹And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets. ²⁰And immediately He called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants, and went away to follow Him.

Just down the seashore a short distance, the Lord calls for James and John, the sons of Zebedee (meaning thunder) to follow Him. Once followers of John the Baptist, they too drop their nets and follow the Lord's call.

The trip to the synagogue in Capernaum

Mark 1: ²¹And they went into Capernaum; and immediately on the Sabbath He entered the synagogue and began to teach. ²²And they were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Found on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum becomes the hometown of Jesus. He seems welcome there, as opposed to His true hometown of Nazareth. On this Sabbath morning, almost eighteen months since His baptism, he enters the synagogue to teach as He has already done in many other synagogues throughout Israel on previous Sabbaths. The Lord's speaking authority differed from the teachers of the Law. By this time the Jewish teaching in the synagogues had been reduced to quoting previous rabbis rather than expounding on the word and will

of God. Mark shows Jesus' unique personage in this passage as the audience clearly notices a difference between His teaching and that of the scribes and rabbis. His message shows a power beyond that of all other teachers.

The Capernaum man with an unclean spirit

Mark 1: 23 And just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit; and he cried out, **24** saying, "What do we have to do with You, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are-- the Holy One of God!" **25** And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "**Be quiet, and come out of him!**" **26** And throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice, and came out of him. **27** And they were all amazed, so that they debated among themselves, saying, "What is this? A new teaching with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him."

At this first recorded visit of Jesus to the synagogue in Capernaum, a demon-possessed man makes his presence known. Jesus recognizes the demon that controlled the man; likewise, the demon recognizes Jesus. He knows Him as God in the flesh. It is interesting that the rabbis failed to recognize Jesus as God in the flesh, but the demon, a fallen angel, knows firsthand Jesus as God the Creator. The painful removal of the demon from the possessed man occurs.

At this point we might think about all the criminals in our prisons who proclaim the name of Jesus as Lord, yet they continue their evil acts. Could it be that they are demon-possessed? Is it a demon within them that spews forth the memorized scriptures in strange rapid succession? Is their salvation in jeopardy like that of this demon-possessed man in Capernaum? Can their only hope be found in the removal of the demon and putting their true trust in the Savior? We might all be amazed at the success of prisoner rehabilitation if we changed our method to a gospel rather than behavioral approach.

In Simon's house in Capernaum, Simon's sick mother-in-law

Mark 1: 28 And immediately the news about Him went out everywhere into all the surrounding district of Galilee. **29** And immediately after they had come out of the synagogue, they came into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. **30** Now Simon's mother-in-law was lying sick with a fever; and immediately they spoke to Him about her. **31** And He came to her and raised her up, taking her by the hand, and the fever left her, and she waited on them.

The miracle performed in the synagogue on that Sabbath makes the news in all of Galilee as the worshipers make their way to their respective homes. They had never experienced a Sabbath like that before, and they cannot contain themselves on their way home. Jesus then accompanies Simon to his home where his mother-in-law lies ill and the Lord performs a miracle for her that day.