

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

INTRODUCTION

Reading the gospels is not easy. And reading Mark's gospel has its own unique challenges. Firstly, Mark is a sophisticated artist who veils the rich truth of Jesus Christ behind irony, allusion, terseness, juxtaposition, repetition, and silence. Why? By reading and discussing this gospel, we will try to find some answers. In order to understand and appreciate its message, the reader has to invest themselves and strain every interpretive muscle. Secondly, Mark's gospel is difficult because it demands a personal life commitment from the reader. The invitation to follow Christ runs throughout the gospel as the reader is trying, along with the disciples, to comprehend who it is that is challenging them to follow him. The invitation to follow Christ is also an invitation to welcome him into our hearts.

Mark's gospel is also the first and oldest gospel, the briefest of the gospels and the only gospel to actually have a title as gospel. Chapter 1 verse 1 begins this way: "The beginning of the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The aim of the gospel, then, is not primarily to provide some history or some biography or some heroic tale. Rather, it is intended to proclaim the good news that God's intention to save the world has begun with the advent (coming) of God's child into the world. Also, the message of the gospel is proclaimed not only in words, but in deeds and through signs. Jesus teaches in all kinds of ways, and the reader is challenged to hear the message through every action, healing, exorcism, conflict, and interaction.

Finally, the structure of Mark is important. From the beginning there is a sense of hurry toward a final and climactic ending - cross/resurrection. The mid-point of the gospel comes in Chapter 8 when Jesus focuses on heading to Jerusalem where he predicts suffering and death (and the surprise of resurrection) in his future. Up to that point, he is in and around the northern countryside of Galilee. A more detailed breakdown of the gospel goes like this:

- 1) Mark 1:1-15 - Beginning
- 2) Mark 1:16 - 8:26 - Galilee
- 3) Mark 8:26 - 10:52 - Between Galilee and Jerusalem
- 4) Mark 11:1 - 15:47 - Jerusalem
- 5) Mark 16: 1-8 - Ending

We will break down our study of the gospel into 10 or so sessions. This means we will also have limited time discussing every verse of the gospel. You are encouraged to read it through carefully and then read each section in advance of our sessions.

CHAPTER 1

Jesus is introduced as a powerful figure from the very start. All the elements of his life journey all the way to the cross are introduced:

- His authority as God's human representative, totally driven by and bound to God's Spirit.

- His struggle with the forces of evil through temptations, exorcisms, and illness.

- The testimony of others about him (John the Baptist, demons, and those healed).

- He wants those who receive from him and recognize him to be secretive about it.

Why?

- His basic message is proclaimed: the time is fulfilled (or ripe), and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news. (1:15)

Let us consider several of these themes in greater detail.

1) Why the big secret? Does Jesus not want others to know who he is? Well, there are different ways of establishing someone's identity. It could be something you notice from the outside or something you feel as a conviction on the inside. If people just focus on the powerful things Jesus does (healings, exorcisms, etc) they may miss the deeper meaning of it all. People want to see displays of power and then they follow or obey because they are afraid, or they want to receive some benefit or reward. But Jesus wants followers who will receive him from within, opening their hearts to his compassionate and costly way of the cross. This cannot happen by admiring the miracles, but by understanding that the miracles are signs that God's rule/fellowship has begun and demands surrender. To surrender and follow will be difficult, But Jesus also has the power of the Holy Spirit to give. It will transform followers even as following will bring challenges.

2) Jesus' message is about God's kingdom (rule/fellowship). This is both spiritual and political. If God's rule is the absolute in a person's life, it means that any earthly rule will only have limited hold over them. Indeed, there may come a time where the rule of God comes into conflict with the rulers and kingdoms of this world. In fact, Jesus will predict such conflict over and over again as he is heading to the cross. The opposition to God's rule may come from earthly rule, but behind earthly rule that is opposed to God's rule, is the rule of evil. Satan is the embodiment of evil in the New Testament. Indeed, the biblical way of speaking often involves externalizing evil in things, like being possessed or tested by demons. Sickness is also caused by the rule of evil, and there is an external face to evil with Satan who rules the demons. For us today, we think of evil more internally as values, motivations, and choices rather than as demons and Satan roaming around.

God's kingdom rule has come near with Jesus. This also means that Jesus is somehow connected to God, indeed, God's very representation embodied in a human. How do we understand divinity and humanity? Can God be human and can a human be divine?