

“The Gospel About Jesus Christ”

The First in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 1:1-8; Malachi 2:17-3:5

Gospel” is a Christian word, a word invested with very distinctive meaning. We assume that when we use the word everyone knows what we mean. But such is not the case. Sadly, many people think that the term “gospel” refers to an upbeat style of music. Historically speaking, however, Christians have used the word “gospel” in two distinct but related ways. One way the term is used is when we speak of a particular message. Those who lived in the days of Jesus and the apostles, understood the word “gospel” to mean “good news,” something which was proclaimed by a messenger—as when a runner came and declared “we won the war.” Christians began using this word as a kind of theological shorthand for a very specific message—the doing and dying of Jesus on behalf of sinners. In 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, Paul speaks of this “good news” (the gospel) as the message of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, according to the Scriptures. The other way Christians used this term was quite possibly first coined by the author of the Gospel of Mark, who opened his message about Jesus with the words, “the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” From this time forward, the term gospel could also refer to one of the first four books in the New Testament, each of which bears witness to Jesus of Nazareth in a unique and powerful way.

We are beginning a new series on the Gospel of Mark. We will spend our time on introductory matters and we will deal with a number of important questions before we begin to work our way through the text of Mark’s Gospel next week. As we get started with this new series, there are a number of matters which we need to address, so as to better understand the nature and character of Mark’s Gospel. What is a Gospel? Is it a biography, or something else? Where and when was Mark’s Gospel written? And for what purpose did Mark write? What are some of the distinctive features of this Gospel? What did this Gospel say to its original audience? And what does it say to us some two-thousand years later?

The first matter we need to address this morning is the question “what is a Gospel?”

Many people, I think, would answer that question in one of two ways. Some would say that the gospel is a kind of biographical account of the life and ministry of Jesus. Others would say that the gospels are “stories about Jesus.” Neither answer is incorrect, because both fail to grasp the fact that a gospel is not primarily a biography. Although the four gospels do give us biographical and factual details about the life of Jesus, they were not written for the purpose of giving us a factual account of Jesus’ life, such as we would find in a modern biography. And since the gospels do contain historical accounts, they are not mere “stories about Jesus” either. Rather, “these books were preaching materials, designed to tell the story of God’s saving action in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. They were called ‘gospels’ because they gave the substance of ‘the gospel,’ declared in Romans 1:16 to be God’s power to salvation to all who believe.”¹

Thus a gospel, such as Mark, was written to bear witness to God’s people about the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark’s Gospel is not merely a biography, nor a historical record of what Jesus did, nor even a theological treatise about Jesus. Rather, Mark’s Gospel is proclamation about Jesus—hence Mark’s

¹ Ralph Martin, Mark Evangelist and Theologian (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 21.

opening declaration, “the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”²

That Mark’s Gospel is essentially proclamation and not biography, does not mean that Mark is not interested in history and with getting the facts right. Mark’s proclamation involves telling his readers accurate information about those things Jesus said and did to demonstrate that he is the “Son of God.” Charles Cranfield, for one, tells us that “a very great confidence in the gospel’s historical reliability is justified,” and that a “reliable picture of the historical Jesus is persevered” in Mark’s Gospel.³ Since Jesus actually said and did the things he’s reported to have said and done, then Mark’s purpose is greatly enhanced—and that purpose is to proclaim the good news about Jesus so as to summon those who hear this message to respond in faith and repentance. Proclamation and history should not be pit against each other in the same sense in which people attempt to divide faith from reason. What Mark tells us about Jesus is designed to create faith in the hearts of all who hear his message. What Mark proclaims about Jesus really happened. Strictly speaking, the Gospel of Mark may not be a biography, but it is just “stories about Jesus” either. A gospel is a carefully crafted witness of what Jesus said and did so that those who read or hear these words are summoned to believe that Jesus is the Christ.

The next matter to be addressed is the question “where and when was this gospel written?”

Christian tradition is virtually unanimous in affirming that Mark’s Gospel is closely tied in some way to the Apostle Peter.⁴ Papias, who was bishop of Hierapolis (about A. D. 130) wrote that Mark was Peter’s interpreter and that Mark wrote accurately, but not in order (chronologically).⁵ Mark included those things he himself remembered about Jesus, as well as that which he received directly from Peter, who reportedly had written down some of the things that Jesus said and did and to which he was an eyewitness. Many scholars take Papias to mean that Mark, who was not a witness to all of the events recorded in his Gospel, but who certainly heard Peter preach on many occasions, took the written and oral material given him by Peter and arranged it in an orderly or logical fashion, but not necessarily in strict chronological order. At its heart, Mark’s Gospel contains the preaching of Peter.

In 160 A. D., another church father, Justin Martyr, makes mention of Peter’s “memoirs.” But what Justin cites from these so-called “memoirs” of Peter are verses from Mark’s Gospel. This indicates that Justin is probably referring to the Gospel of Mark, which makes sense since Mark and Peter were closely associated with one another in the early church. Another document (the Anti-Marcionite Fragment) which includes an introduction to Mark’s Gospel, includes the following comment: “Mark declared, who is called ‘stump-fingered’ because he had short fingers in comparison with the size of the rest of his body. He was Peter’s interpreter. After the death of Peter himself, he [Mark] wrote down this same

² William Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, NICNT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 1.

³ Charles Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark: The Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 16-17.

⁴ See the discussions in Lane, Martin, Cranfield.

⁵ See the discussion of Papias’ comment; in Robert Gundry, Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 1026-1045.

gospel in the regions of Italy.”⁶ This tradition fits quite well with things we do know to be true about Mark and his connection to Peter.

Many scholars have noted that the material in Mark’s Gospel is very similar in terms of its order and content to a summary of one of Peter’s sermons which was given at Cornelius’ house in Caesarea and which is recorded for us in Acts 10:36-41. This too makes the connection between Mark and Peter that much stronger, since Mark’s Gospel is arranged much like one of Peter’s known sermons.⁷ Other scholars, such as Martin Hengel, have pointed out some of the not so obvious ways that Mark’s Gospel reflects the preaching of Peter. For one thing, Peter is mentioned in Mark more than in any other gospel. Peter’s call to follow Christ is mentioned before the call of the other disciples (Mark 1:16), and his confession of Jesus as the Christ is the climax of the first half of the gospel. But immediately after his confession, it is Peter who then seeks for Jesus to find some other way to complete his mission than by dying on the cross—a comment which brings a strong rebuke of Peter from Jesus—“*get behind me, Satan*” (Mark 8:33). It is Peter who coldly denies Jesus after Jesus is arrested (Mark 14:66-72). While this incident would bring hope to those Christians who denied being a follower of Jesus to avoid persecution—just as Peter was forgiven and restored by Jesus, so can others—these rather negative reports about Peter only serve to bolster his tie to Mark. Peter clearly was the leader of the apostles. Since this gospel contains so many of Peter’s most embarrassing moments, surely Mark would not have been so widely accepted if this material had not come from Peter himself. How could any gospel—which contains so much that is critical of Peter—be accepted so quickly and so widely throughout the church, if it had come from anyone else? It would not. The only way such a gospel would have been accepted was if these negative reports about Peter came from Peter himself.⁸

Mark’s direct association with Peter is substantiated in other places within the New Testament. In 1 Peter 5:13, Peter speaks of being in Babylon (Rome) with his son, Mark. This is not a reference to a biological relationship (i.e., that Peter is Mark’s father), but a statement of Peter’s fondness for Mark (Peter loves Mark like a son). Mark is also mentioned several times in Acts 12. His mother Mary lived in Jerusalem and opened up her home to persecuted Christians. She was visited by Peter after the apostle had been released from prison. Mark is also connected to his cousin Barnabas (cf. Colossians 4:10) and Saul. In Acts 15, he is mentioned again in a less than flattering light as someone Paul did not want going on a missionary journey with him, because Mark had previously abandoned Paul when things got tough. Paul chose Silas instead. But by the time Peter writes his epistle, Mark is in Rome, closely connected to the chief apostle, likely having proved himself faithful after being considered unreliable when he worked with Paul. So, Scripture clearly identifies Mark as an associate of the apostles, especially Peter and Peter’s first epistle, places Mark in Rome when Peter was there. This fits perfectly with early church tradition.

Although a date in the late 50’s is possible, it is likely that Mark wrote his Gospel in Italy shortly after

⁶ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 4; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 21 ff.

⁷ Cf. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 10-11.

⁸ Martin Hengel, *Studies in the Gospel of Mark*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 106-107.

Peter had died in Rome at the hands of Nero.⁹ Peter's death is usually dated in A.D.64-65, and Mark must have written his gospel before the Fall of Jerusalem in A.D.70, since Jesus prophesies that this event is yet future. While some scholars place the origin of Mark's gospel in Palestine, the evidence points to this gospel being written near Rome, shortly after Peter's death. This point becomes all the stronger when we notice that Mark uses a number of Latin words and terms, which seems to place Mark in Rome—although Latin was spoken throughout the Roman Empire, which included Palestine. Given the fact that Mark's Gospel was so-widely accepted so soon after its composition seems to point to Peter's authority and to fact that Christians knew of Mark's connection to Peter. The frequent references to suffering, persecution, rejection and even martyrdom in Mark's Gospel, also seem to point to a time and place associated with Nero's persecution of Christians in Rome which began in 63-64 A.D.¹⁰

How is Mark related to the two other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke? Most scholars (both critical and conservative) believe that Mark's Gospel was the first gospel written and that his Gospel was utilized by both Matthew and Luke when they wrote shortly thereafter. This is probably the case because over 90% of Mark is reproduced in Matthew and over 50% in Luke. In fact, Matthew's Gospel seems to be based upon the Gospel of Mark and a body of the memorized says of Jesus—the so called “two source” theory. When Luke wrote his gospel, he tells us plainly in the opening verses that “*many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account.*” When an incident is found in all three gospels, more than 50% of the time, Mark's wording is used. And most of the time, Matthew and Luke follow the general order of Mark—even though Mark is not strictly chronological. All of this points to the fact that Mark's Gospel was written before Matthew and Luke, and that both of them were familiar with Mark.

Although Mark is probably the oldest gospel, after the time of Augustine, Mark was largely overlooked for centuries by many in the church. Augustine believed that Mark was an abridgement of Matthew—a view which prevailed for some time. If Mark was just a shortened version of Matthew, of course, Matthew's Gospel got far and away the most attention.¹¹ But that view has changed of late, since most scholars now think that Mark is the oldest gospel. Mark's Gospel has finally gotten the scholarly attention it so rightly deserves, as the recent number of large and scholarly commentaries on Mark attest.

That brings us to the next question, “Why did Mark write his gospel?”

If we look at Mark's personal and historical situation, we can see why composing a record of Peter's preaching would have served a number of important functions in the early church. First and foremost, Christianity is a religion that is centered in the preaching (proclamation) of a particular message about Jesus of Nazareth. If the apostles themselves could no longer preach about Jesus—they were dying off, or could not travel freely—the next best thing would have been to write down the contents of their preaching so that it could be widely disseminated among the churches. If the scenario we have

⁹ D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo and Leon Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan,1992), 96-99.

¹⁰ See the discussion in Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 8-9.

¹¹ Martin, Mark, Evangelist and Theologian, 27-32.

just set out is true, this means that Mark is the first to put the words and deeds of Jesus in written form, so that the proclamation about Jesus could be spread far and wide as this gospel was read in the churches.¹² This apparently was the case given the wide acceptance of this gospel and the production of three others.

As we will see as we work our way through the text of Mark's proclamation about Jesus, there are a number of indications that Mark was writing to people who were facing great persecution—which is rather strong evidence that Mark was composed at Rome at or about the time of Nero's horrible persecution of Christians.¹³ Mark's Gospel centers around the doing and dying of Jesus. Indeed the very fact that Jesus himself had been unjustly put to death and was then raised from the dead, would have been very comforting to Christians facing intense persecution at the hands of the maniacal Nero. The way in which Mark's Gospel is arranged bears this out. Nearly one half of this gospel is devoted to the final period of Jesus' ministry, his suffering, death and resurrection. We learn from Mark that God sent Jesus into the world for this very purpose—to suffer and die, and then conquer death and the grave, to save sinners.

This would certainly explain why Mark's Gospel has two important climaxes in his proclamation about Jesus. The first critical moment occurs in Mark 8:29 when Jesus looks at Peter and asks him, "*Who do you say I am?*" Peter answered, *'You are the Christ.'*" Everything in the first eight chapters of Mark has led up to this great moment—when Peter finally figures out who Jesus is and confesses that Jesus is the Messiah in the presence of the others. And then everything which follows Peter's confession, leads Jesus to the cross. In fact, the second great climax in the story comes in Mark 15:39, when a Roman soldier, the centurion, the man who is responsible to put Jesus to death, watches Jesus die and then confesses about him, "*Surely this man was the Son of God!*"¹⁴ The first great turning point is when the leader of the twelve apostles recognizes Jesus. The second is when a pagan Roman soldier makes the same observation. Mark will repeatedly tell us that this is why God sent Jesus into the world. This is also why Mark leaves us with these powerful words of an angel in verse 6, of chapter 16: "*Don't be alarmed,' he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.'*" Mark's testimony about Jesus does not end with the death of Jesus, but Mark ends upon a note of great victory—the empty tomb! And this victory demands of us that we too believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ and that we too repent of our sins.

All of this means that Mark wrote his Gospel for one primary reason—to call those who hear his account to trust in Jesus Christ, so that they might be delivered from the guilt of their sins. This book sets forth the Gospel—the good news—about Jesus Christ. And because Mark wrote with this purpose in mind, Christians found this gospel invaluable from the very beginning. For one thing, Mark's Gospel would have given great hope to persecuted believers. Jesus—the one whom God sent to save us from our sins, was himself horribly and unjustly persecuted, so when persecution befalls those who hear Mark's words they know that the one for whose sake they are being persecuted—can identify with his people. In this gospel, persecuted Christians are reminded that they will somehow participate in Christ's great victory over death and the grave. And then Mark's short, dramatic, rapid-paced gospel would provide not only material for Christians to proclaim (preach), but would have given Christians sound instruction in the

¹² Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 1.

¹³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 14-15.

¹⁴ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 2.

basics of the faith (catechesis, perhaps in preparation for baptism), material for liturgical purposes (to be read and used in Christian worship), as well as offering encouragement to Christians in the midst of persecution and possible martyrdom.¹⁵ Here is a simple text for Christians to preach and from which to teach. Here is a text which serves well the missionary endeavors of the church. Here is a text which lies at the foundation of the two other synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke.

What are some of the distinctive features of this Gospel?

It should be immediately apparent to those who read Mark that the most distinctive thing about this Gospel is its brevity and fast pace. One writer has said that Mark “is characterized by simplicity and straightforwardness.”¹⁶ How true. Another writer speaks of the Greek text of Mark as “unpretentious and close to the everyday spoken Greek of the time.”¹⁷ That too is true. Mark’s sentences are simple and short and are frequently connected with the conjunction “and.” The word “immediately” is used frequently and Mark is both vivid in detail and constantly focused upon action rather than speech.

This emphasis on vivid detail can be seen when Mark speaks of the animals in the wilderness with Jesus (Mark 1:13). Mark gives us the nicknames of James and John (3:17), and he speaks of the fisherman’s pillow in the boat (4:38). These are things only participants in these events would have known and this gives this Gospel the “ring of truth.” Furthermore, Mark gives us the name of the blind man who was given his sight by Jesus—Bartimaeus (10:46). Mark recounts the reaction of the people to Jesus on a number of occasions (1:27; 2:12), as well as describing various emotions of the disciples—fear and amazement (9:5; 10:24). Mark also describes the emotions of Jesus—anger, compassion and exasperation (1:41, 43; 3:5; 7:34).¹⁸ Over 150 times Mark uses the present tense to describe something which happened in the past. Throughout his gospel, Mark explains Jewish customs for his Gentile readers. Mark does all of this to put the reader/listener on the scene of the action so that the reader can feel and visualize what Mark is describing. It is a very effective technique, and would be especially powerful to Gentiles, who would have been much more interested in what Jesus himself said and did, than with how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy—something especially important to Matthew, who is writing to a primarily Jewish audience. All of this serves to put those who read or listen to Mark into the audience when Jesus himself spoke and acted.¹⁹ Mark has been called “the action gospel.”

Why study Mark? What is here for us?

First and foremost, the Gospel of Mark is vital for us to study because in this gospel we are summoned to believe that Jesus is the Christ and to submit to his Lordship. We must make the same confession about Jesus that both Peter and the centurion made. We must believe and confess that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God. That alone is a sufficient reason to study Mark.

¹⁵ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 14-15.

¹⁶ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 26.

¹⁷ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 20.

¹⁸ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 26-27.

¹⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 27.

But there is more that we can say. Certainly one important reason to study this gospel is that Mark serves an important apologetic or evangelistic purpose—you cannot communicate to people what you don't know or, are afraid might not be true. In Mark's Gospel we come as close as we can to Jesus of Nazareth. In this gospel we learn some of the most important things that Jesus said and did. We meet the Jesus who really lived and who spoke the words recorded here. Far too often we assume that Christians know and understand the basic facts of Christianity. But many of us do not know the events surrounding the life and death of Jesus well enough to recount them to our non-Christian friends and neighbors—and this is what true evangelism entails. Familiarity with the Gospel of Mark is a great place to begin overcoming this fear and lack of confidence in telling others about Jesus. There are many Christians who counsel new converts or non-Christians to start with Mark's Gospel—I wholeheartedly agree. So my homework assignment to you is that you read this Gospel through at least once, in its entirety. Perhaps you might even want to read Mark for your devotions or include it in your family bible reading and catechesis.

As for its redemptive historical significance, we must recall the Exodus—those forty years the people of God wandered in the wilderness. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus calls his people out from the nations in what amounts to a new Exodus. Just as Israel was called out of bondage and slavery in Egypt, so too, Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, summons Israel to once again cross through the sea in his baptism of repentance. Having been baptized by John, Jesus immediately begins his Messianic mission. Mark repeatedly speaks of Jesus being in the wilderness, which calls to mind the fact that Jesus is the true Israel, and who, unlike the Israelites we saw in the Books of Exodus and Numbers and who frequently grumbled and complained and doubted God's promise, faithfully obeyed his father's will. And his father's will inevitably takes Jesus to the cross, where he suffers and dies for the guilt of our sins.

The new Exodus brought about by Jesus is tied to coming of the kingdom of God (which is the rule or reign of God). Jesus is revealed to be both the Son of God and yet at the same time the servant of all. Not only did the prophet Isaiah foretell of this New Exodus and dawn of the kingdom of God at the dawn of the Messianic age, so did the prophet Malachi. As we see in our Old Testament lesson, Malachi foretold of an age about which the LORD declares, *"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me."* That, of course, is a reference to John the Baptist. But as soon as the messenger comes, he is followed by another—the Messiah himself. *"Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years."* With the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, Mark can now proclaim the good news that what God had promised Isaiah and Malachi, he has now brought to pass in Jesus of Nazareth.

Therefore, when we read in the opening words of Mark's Gospel, *"the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is written in Isaiah the prophet: 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way'—'a voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him,'"* we know that what both Isaiah and Malachi had predicted is a reality—the kingdom of God is at hand. A new exodus is about to begin. The messianic age has dawned. And through this wonderful proclamation of the "good news" about Jesus, the Gospel of Mark, we too will be summoned to believe and confess that Jesus is the Son of God. We will be called to repent of our sins. And we will hear the voice of our Savior—who came to serve, not to be served and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). Amen.