

Who Do You Say That He Is?

Mark 1:1-3 February 5, 2025

Mark 1:1-3 - The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in Isaiah the prophet: "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way." ³A voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way for the Lord; make his paths straight!

Have you ever wondered why we have these four Gospels in the New Testament? Christ's life could've filled *thousands* of books. In fact, John tells us the whole world isn't big enough for what *could* be written about Jesus' life on the earth.¹ But Matthew, Mark, and Luke seem to cover a lot of the same material. So much so that scholars group them together in what they call the "Synoptic Gospels." John is off doing his own thing in his book.

The Holy Spirit determined that *these* four accounts were what we need to know about the life of Christ. Each was written from a unique perspective, to a unique initial audience, and with unique emphasis. Matthew was a Jew writing to Jews, Luke a Gentile writing to Gentiles. Luke's Gospel is extremely historical, John's very theological. Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the Son of David. John presents Him as the eternal Light of the World through Whom all things were created.

Where does Mark fit in? Frankly, Mark is often the odd man out. A lot of Christians can tell you that the Nativity is in Luke 2, that the Sermon on the Mount starts in Matthew 5, that Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus is in John 3. I bet *most* of us don't have a similar familiarity when it comes to Mark.

It is the least frequently read or referenced Gospel.² In fact, there was no commentary on Mark for 500 years after it was written! And *then* there wasn't a second one written for another 300 years!³

Would it surprise you to learn that Mark was not only the *first* Gospel written, but that, with this book, Mark *invented* the literary genre that we call "Gospel?"⁴ You see, like the other Gospels, Mark is not *really* a biography - certainly not in the way we think about it. It doesn't give any information about the beginning decades of Jesus' life. Mark doesn't really tell us what was going on in the wider world. Biographies usually try to fill in as many gaps as possible with character development.

But Gospels are not just biography. They're something *new* in human history. They present the story of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. They're *proclaiming* Good News to needy hearts. The opening line of this book is paraphrased this way: "The beginning of the preaching of the joyful tidings concerning Jesus the Messiah."⁵ This is no mere biography. This

¹ John 21:25

² Charles Erdman *The Gospel Of Mark*

³ Kenneth Cooper *The Theological Message Of The Gospel Of Mark*

⁴ James Brooks *The New American Commentary, Volume 23: Mark*

⁵ William Lane *The Gospel Of Mark*

is a we-interrupt-your-regular-programming, breaking news message. It's not a book for the shelf, it's a book *for you*.

In these opening sentences, Mark provides a *lot* of specific information at us about this Person He wants us to know about, Jesus. First, He is identified as the *Christ*. It means the Anointed One, the Messiah.⁶ The single most significant, important, consequential figure in all human history.

In Jesus' day, there were many concepts of who the Messiah would be and what he would do.⁷ Several individuals had already tried to lay claim to the title, but none lived up to the name. Today, humanity still searches for a Deliverer. Who is going to save Western civilization? Who is going to stop all the wars? Who is going to overcome the existential threats looming on the horizon? Who will get society on the right track?

Here on page 1, chapter 1, verse 1, line 1, Mark points his finger *directly* at this Man from Nazareth and tells us, "*This is the One!*" This is the Person we can hitch our lives, our families, our communities, our nation to. This is the Person Who changes *everything*.

But then, not only is Jesus the promised Messiah, but He is the Son of God. This is a very important truth Mark highlights as he opens and closes the book. The last thing that a human being will say about Jesus in this Gospel is, "Truly this man was the Son of God." Mark is being extremely clear and direct about his message: Jesus of Nazareth is God come in Human flesh and He is the Savior.

As Mark introduces this Person to us, he lets us know right away that this is *exactly* Who the Old Testament anticipated. Jesus doesn't just show up out of nowhere. The Old Testament shows us that He is the One sent by God. We're not waiting for someone else. The Messiah *has* come.

In your version, verse 2 may say, "As it is written in the Prophets." In many others, it specifically name-checks Isaiah. Mark's quote here is an amalgam of Isaiah, Malachi, *and* Exodus. Mark seems to have a special affinity for Daniel as well - he quotes from every single chapter of Daniel's book.⁸

Today with all the sequels and reboots and cinematic universes, sometimes before you see a movie you kind of need to see some other movies, right? Or at least, seeing those previous entries will give you context for what you're about to see.

We want to know Jesus. We want to be in intimate communion with Him. In a sense, Mark starts off by saying, "I'm going to tell you a lot about this Messiah, but when's the last time you cracked open Malachi?" Jesus came in the *volume* of the Book. Though Mark was creating a new genre of literature, it was simply a continuation of God's special revelation of Himself to humanity.

⁶ *NASB Dictionaries*

⁷ *CSB Study Bible Notes*

⁸ Ben Witherington *The Gospel Of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*

So, Mark wants us to know that Jesus is the Christ and He is the Son of God, but what we'll also see is that Mark really wants us to understand that Jesus came as the suffering-Servant.

In a climactic moment, Jesus is trying to explain to His disciples why He came, and says:

Mark 10:45 - ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Perhaps this is why Mark has no genealogy for Jesus, no reference to the angelic host lighting the sky on the night of His birth. No one really cares where the servant comes from.⁹ Jesus came to serve. He came with unfailing love and mercy and sacrifice toward the people of earth. This Gospel shows us encounter after encounter between Jesus and all sorts of people, and His attempts to help them, to teach them, and save them. To change their lives by being in relationship to Him.

Amazingly we will find that almost *no one* understood Jesus during His earthly ministry. In fact, in *every single chapter* we find people misunderstanding Him, failing to comprehend what He meant, and bewildered by His choices. People are constantly coming up to Him and saying, "Why did You do that? What are Your disciples doing? What did you mean? Who do You think You are?"

There was constant friction between Jesus and peasants, Jesus and Pharisees, Jesus and scribes, Jesus and Sadducees, Jesus and Herod, Jesus and Pilate, Jesus and Jews, Jesus and Gentiles, Jesus and His family, Jesus and His disciples. We'll find in Mark that His disciples almost *constantly* misunderstood their Master, sometimes in truly embarrassing ways.

This Gospel focuses not only on the saving work of Christ, but also on whether or not people understood Who He was and what that meant for them.

The hinge of the entire book is this scene where Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they offer all sorts of answers. But the pivotal moment comes when Jesus says to them, "But you, who do *you* say that I am?" That's the key narrative thrust of this book. And because this is not just a biography, but a Gospel, a living proclamation directed at *you*, we, too, must answer that most-important question. Mark is a message delivered to you that demands a response.

Mark could have written a book listing all the *triumphs* of Christ, without the denials, without showing the fears of the people around him. But he didn't. Instead, Mark seemed to write this Gospel for people in crisis.¹⁰ People who had failures of their own. People who had heard the preaching about Jesus, but were they *following* Him? Did they understand what it meant that the Messiah was revealed and was calling them into relationship with Him?

Mark wrote this book primarily to Christians living in the city of Rome and elsewhere in Italy.¹¹ It

⁹ Cooper

¹⁰ Lane

¹¹ Third Millennium Ministries *The Gospel According To Mark*

was somewhere around 65AD. Rome had just burned in 64AD. Nero blamed the Christians for the fire and prejudice and violent persecution was engulfing the believers in the area.¹² As they faced this terrible trial, what hope could they have for deliverance? What good was Christianity in a time like that? *Where* was the Messiah? Could the power and love and life of Jesus really help them?

Mark wanted these persecuted Christians to not only know that their Christ had power for them but that He *identified* with them. He wanted them to be encouraged and filled with hope by seeing their Savior. Toward that end, he put a few easter eggs in this book. For example, Mark's is the only Gospel that mentions the "wild animals" with Jesus during His wilderness temptation. At the time, Christians were being brought into the arena and fed to wild beasts.¹³ Mark is the only Gospel-writer to record Jesus' statement that, "everyone will be salted with fire." Nero used Christians as torches in his courtyard. This Gospel was speaking directly to its initial readers. It still speaks today.

It shows them that the Messiah has come. He lived, He taught, He died, and He rose. And now it was time for them to decide what they really believed about Jesus. Who did they say He is? Was He just another phony revolutionary, or was He the real real? Who was this Jesus? Would they run and hide as we see so many people do in this book or would they walk by faith?

Mark knew something about doubt and fear and failure. He knew about cutting-and-running. He's an interesting Bible character. We more commonly know him as *John-Mark* and through various references are able to sketch a good picture of his life. In fact - I have to throw this in - the church fathers say that he was known as Mark "stump-fingers."¹⁴

He grew up in a wealthy home. By Acts 12, the church was meeting in his mother's house in Jerusalem. Papias, the church father who lived from 60-130AD records that Mark did *not* follow Jesus as a disciple before the resurrection. But at some point after, he became a Christian. Perhaps it was through the ministry of his cousin, Barnabas, the friend and missionary partner of Paul.

Paul and Barnabas brought Mark on their first missionary journey. He wasn't just tagging along - he was given an important role on the trip.¹⁵ But, partway through, Mark abandoned the team. We don't really know why, but we know that Paul was not happy about it. Mark had *deserted* them.

Later, when Paul and Barnabas were getting ready to hit the mission field again, they argued so passionately about whether to give Mark a second shot that they parted ways. Many scholars believe Mark was the young man referenced in Mark 14:52 who was in the Garden of Gethsemane but ran away naked when everything went down. The first act of his story is fear, failure, and flight.

But then, as the New Testament continues, Mark's story changes because *Mark* changes. Before his martyrdom, Paul had changed his mind about Mark. In his final letter, he asks Timothy to bring

¹² Lane

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

Mark to see him because, Mark “is useful to me in the ministry.”¹⁶ In Colossians, Paul says Mark had become a comfort to him and a coworker for the kingdom of God.¹⁷

Peter called Mark his son in the faith.¹⁸ What Timothy was to Paul, Mark was to Peter. In fact, church fathers like Papias in 140AD and other writings near that time record that Mark worked with Peter and received all his material for this Gospel from him. Mark was called the “interpreter” of Peter’s message.¹⁹ Which is probably why Peter is such a highlighted figure in the book.

So, what changed? How did he go from being a doubting, fearful flake to a faithful disciples and Evangelist? From stump-fingered to stout-hearted? Circumstances didn’t get easier. The answer is simple: This *Messiah* transformed his life. Through faith, he was converted from fear to certainty, from flakiness to dependable, from cutting-and-running to serving in the eternal Kingdom of God. Once he truly realized Who Jesus is he was able to understand what it really meant to be a disciple.

Now, looking around at his Christian brothers and sisters in Italy and beyond, he knew they needed to understand not only what was true about their Messiah, but what it really meant to follow Him. Wilfrid Harrington writes, “[Mark realizes] *It is easy enough...to declare, even with conviction: [Jesus is] the Messiah. What matters is how one understands that confession.*”²⁰

What does it really mean to follow Jesus as a disciple? In this book, we’ll see again and again that the disciples were the ones who seemed to misunderstand Him the *most!* But the good news is that failure isn’t the last word. Not for Peter. Not for the disciples who scattered from Gethsemene or the women who ran away in fear at the empty tomb, not for John Mark, and not for us.

The One true Messiah still calls us to follow Him and have our lives transformed by *His* power, *His* teachings, *His* values, *His* understanding. To *understand* Who He is and what discipleship is.

Remember the very first words of the book: The *beginning* of the Gospel. This is not just a message for Peter or for people in Rome. It is a living, preaching testimony of Good News to *you* and to me. So, who do we say Jesus is? Mark closes his book with all the characters in the wind, all confronted with a faith choice. We know the choice Mark ultimately made, the choice Peter made. What about you? If Jesus is who Mark says He is, then everything must change. My whole life must become a response to His arrival, like someone preparing the way for the coming of a King, making His path straight. To ready myself for Him, conform my life to Him, watch for Him, listen to Him.

As we see our Savior on the pages of this Gospel, we’ll see His kindness, His compassion, His patience, His power, His tenderness, His grace, His divinity - but also His expectations and commands. Not only Who He is but what it really means to follow Him. The Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God has been sent to us. Who do we say that He is?

¹⁶ 2 Timothy 4:11

¹⁷ Colossians 4:10

¹⁸ 1 Peter 5:13

¹⁹ Erdman, Lane

²⁰ Wilfrid Harrington *Reading Mark For The First Time*