

## Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

### I. What is a Gospel?

1. The Gospels are not journalistic accounts, history textbooks, or fictional works.
2. The Greek word for gospel is euangelion which means “good news.”
3. The Gospels are stories written from a Christian faith perspective for use in worship and instruction. “The Gospels are first and foremost theology; they are written to help us understand what God is doing in and through Jesus.”<sup>1</sup> Mark is specifically an account of God revealing Himself to humankind in the person of Jesus Christ. Its audience and purpose are slightly different than the other gospel accounts but its message is essentially the same. “We recognize our own pilgrimages from here to there in a good story; we feel its movement in our bones and know it is ‘right.’”<sup>2</sup>

### II. Mark and the Other Gospels

1. There are four canonical gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.
2. Three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. The word, synoptic means “to see with one eye” or to see “together.” Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic gospels because, unlike John, they are written in a similar way and share similar material.
3. Mark compared to other gospels: “Mark is the shortest and most compact of the 4 gospels” (Edwards) and uses an ordinary spoken vocabulary.<sup>3</sup>

### III. Authorship: Why is it called the Gospel According to Mark?

1. There is no evidence within Mark’s gospel that clearly indicates Mark’s authorship.
2. The title, *The Gospel According to Mark*, was added in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century by Papias, bishop of Hierapolis. The first half of second century is where all the Gospel titles appear.
3. Early church tradition attributes the Gospel to John Mark (Acts 12:12), a contemporary of Peter. The stories in Mark are considered by some as written versions of Peter’s preaching. “...authentic voice and interpreter of Peter.”<sup>4</sup>
4. Apostolic identity was extremely important in the process of canonizing early Christian literature. The fact that Mark, who is not an apostle, is identified as the writer is an authenticating factor in support of his authorship. (Luke is not an apostle either.)

### IV. Historical Context

1. Date: Many modern scholars believe that Mark was written sometime between 65 and 70 AD/CE, before the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.
2. Place: Rome or Galilee.
3. Circumstance: Some scholars also believe that Mark was written in Rome to Christians who were experiencing persecution. Nero’s persecution of Christians coincides with the date and the circumstances in which Mark was written, providing further evidence for this belief.

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<sup>1</sup> The Gospel According to Mark. *Kerygma*. Miller, Carol J.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospel According to Mark. *Kerygma*. Sallie MacFague.

<sup>3</sup> Edwards, James. *The Gospel According to Mark: Commentary*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ancient Biblical Commentary*.

4. Markan priority vs. Matthean priority: Which gospel, Matthew or Mark, was written first? Mark was thought to be a shorter version of Matthew until 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship found evidence to the contrary. Today, many biblical scholars believe that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke used some of the material in Mark to write their gospel accounts. St. Augustine, a 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century theologian said, “Mark imitated Matthew like a lackey and is regarded as his abbreviator.”<sup>5</sup> This stance was held by church fathers up until the time of the Enlightenment.

5. Most important points: 1. Mark was written to Christians experiencing persecution. 2. Mark was written to a Gentile audience.

### **V. Literary Context: How is Mark written?**

1. Structure: Prologue (1:1-13) - Galilean Ministry (1:14-8:26) – On the way to Jerusalem (8:27-10:52) – Proclaiming God’s Kingdom in Jerusalem (11:1-16:8).

2. Action packed: Mark contains less teaching and more action. “It is quickly apparent that the person of the teacher is more important than the content of his teaching”

(Edwards, 13). Jesus’ actions take center stage in this quick paced narrative.

3. Important Themes: Nature of Discipleship, Insider/Outsider Motif, Faith, Gentiles, Command to Silence, Journey. (Edwards)

### **Discipleship**

#### **Mark 3:13-19, 31-35**

#### **A. Icebreakers**

**1. Given the opportunity to interview only one of Jesus’ disciples, who would you interview? Why?**

**2. If you could visit any mountain range, which one would you visit? Why?**

#### **B. Read Mark 3:13-19 & 3:31-35**

#### **C. Discussion Questions**

1. What qualifies the 12 appointed disciples for leadership in Christ’s church? “Discipleship does not consist in what disciples can do for Christ, but in what Christ can make of disciples” (Edwards, 112).
2. Why do you think Jesus chose these particular men?
3. If you were starting a church what kind of people would you choose to lead it?
4. Name some elements that you think are essential for starting a church (Resources, People, etc.).
5. What do we know about mountains in the Bible? [Examples: A. Mt. Sinai/Mt. Horeb: Place of divine revelation – Burning Bush, Ten Commandments. B. Mt. Carmel: Face off between Yahweh and Baal (Elijah, prophet of God vs. Prophets of Baal) 1 Kings 18]
6. How does the mountain setting in vv. 13-19 influence your interpretation of the story?
7. Who are Jesus’ true “mother” and “brothers” and “sisters”? [Mark 3:35]

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<sup>5</sup> Ancient Biblical Commentary. *Mark*.

8. What does Jesus' response to the previous question tell us about the nature of discipleship? [Discipleship, although a gift of grace, also requires obedience.]

#### **D. Key Points Concerning Discipleship**

1. Discipleship is created and defined by Jesus.
2. Discipleship requires relationship and service.
3. Discipleship is offered to everyone.
4. **Warning** to people who think they know Jesus well: Be wary of familiarity that breeds contempt.

### **Fear and Faith**

**Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-20, and 5:21-43**

#### **A. Icebreakers**

1. What was one of your worst fears when you were a child?
2. Describe a time when you felt like your faith was strong.

#### **B. Read Mark 4:35-41, 5:1-20, and 5:21-43**

#### **C. Discussion Questions**

1. What causes fear in the 4 stories we just read? [Storm (5:37), Jesus (5:15), Jesus and/or crowds (5:33), death of daughter (5:36).]
2. How is fear overcome? ["Do not fear, only believe."]
3. What are the consequences of giving into fear?
4. Is fear always a bad thing? Why or why not?
5. Jesus says to Jairus, "Do not fear, only believe." How do we 'believe' or have faith, especially in dire circumstances?
6. What are the major causes of fear in our society?
7. Try to describe the relationship between faith and fear.
8. Do you agree with the famous statement, "The only thing to fear is fear itself?" Why or why not?

### **Concluding the Gospel According to Mark**

**Mark 15:40 – 16:8**

#### **A. Icebreakers**

1. What is your best Easter memory?
2. If God were to show up today in human form, do you think you would recognize him?

**B. Read Mark 15:40 – 16:8** [Since many biblical scholars believe that the original version of this Gospel ended on verse 16:8 I would like you to limit your discussion to the verses indicated above. It will be tempting to read the "Shorter Ending" (16:9) and the "Longer Ending" (16:9-20), but please refrain until you have finished discussing the questions below. Who knows? You may see something you missed during previous readings!]

### **C. Discussion Questions: The Resurrection According to Mark**

1. Mark only includes Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joses, and Salome when giving his account of the first visit to Jesus' tomb. Why or how is this significant? Does it make a difference in the overall scheme of things? [Observation: The fact that first witnesses to the resurrection are women may add to the authenticity of Mark's account.]
2. What is the response of the three women? [16:8 - "they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."]
3. Does their fearful response bother you?
4. Why would the Gospel writer include such a disturbing detail? [Remember, it is thought that Mark was writing this Gospel account for a community of persecuted Christians.]
5. Putting yourself in the women's place, how do you think you would have responded to a "young man in a white robe" and the mysterious disappearance of Jesus' body?
6. What fears, if any, hinder you from witnessing to the resurrection?
7. How are we to overcome our fear and fulfill our role as witnesses to Jesus Christ?