

## Bible background

Quarterly  
feature

# The Gospel of Mark

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**M**ARK'S GOSPEL is a Gospel of pace and action, in which readers are fairly catapulted through the remarkable ministry of Jesus before arriving finally at the portrayal of his sufferings in the last three chapters. Whereas Mark chooses to present relatively little of the teaching content of Jesus' message (in comparison to the other three Gospels, that is), he is indisputably concerned with what Jesus *did*—and with packing as much of it into a small space as possible.

### Time for action

In particular, Mark is interested in miracles. Of the 450 or so verses that comprise his account of Jesus' public ministry, around two hundred are given over to miracle accounts. This is a very different ratio from what we find in the other Gospels. Mark gets on with the job—quickly and powerfully—of telling the narrative story of Jesus' life: what he did, where he went, and how amazing it all was. More episodes are crammed into Mark, proportionally speaking, than into any of the other Gospels.<sup>1</sup>

Mark also seems to provide the substructure of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). Of the 650 (or thereabouts) verses in Mark, around 600 have their equivalent in Matthew and Luke. Whereas both Matthew and Luke contain material unique to themselves, there is relatively little in Mark which in essence is unique to him. This is one of the key reasons why most scholars posit that Mark was the first Gospel (at least, the first of the Synoptics), and that both Matthew and Luke had Mark in front of them as a source when they did their own work of Gospel writing. There seems to be reasonable evidence for this view, and the theory of the priority of Mark need in no way contradict one's understanding of inspiration.<sup>2</sup>

### The language of speed

The notion of pace in Mark's Gospel is best demonstrated by a brief examination of one of his most distinctive terms: '*immediately*' (also translated by the AV as '*straightway*', '*forthwith*',

*'anon'*, etc.). This term occurs around forty times in the Gospel, more than its usage in the rest of the New Testament put together. Mark seems particularly intent on hitting us with its force in chapter 1, where it occurs ten times (and a related word once). Right from the outset, from the instant he ascends from the waters of baptism, in which he commits his ways to God, Jesus' ministry takes off in explosive style. There is so much to be done, and so little time. So many people with so many needs crowd in upon him; there are so many opportunities to serve his Father and his Lord. The term captures both his drive and his sense of urgency, his sense of willingness and immediacy in service, and the sense of the enormous and unabated need that existed amongst the people for the salvation he offered.

There are a number of occurrences of the term which are particularly interesting. The first use, in 1:10, indicates God's urgent desire to commend His Son and bestow the Spirit upon him once Jesus had chosen the course of baptism. The next, in which the Spirit drives him into the wilderness (1:12), captures both God's active direction in Jesus' life and the necessity that Jesus should face real temptation. In 1:18 the disciples catch something of Jesus' own urgency as they respond to his call; his enthusiasm is infectious. And set against these is the reference in 3:6, in which the Pharisees are as urgent to destroy him as he is to do the will of his Father.

But perhaps most interesting of all is the use of a related term in 1:3, Mark's unique opening quotation, which he selects as the header for the Gospel. The reference is to Isaiah's famous prophecy about John the Baptist: "The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make His paths straight" (*cf.* Isa. 40:3). The term "straight" here is closely related

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1. There seems to be a particular focus on the ministry in the *north*. This can be seen by collating the place names referred to within the Gospel.
  2. The notion that much of Mark's Gospel is sourced from Peter's eyewitness accounts has won some credibility.

to the term 'immediately'. We might capture the connection in English like this: it was a straight way, and straightway Jesus set out to walk upon it, in every aspect of everything that he did.

### Active to passive

Yet as we proceed through the Gospel the term gradually falls away. Although used another thirty or so times after chapter 1, the vast majority of these are in the first half of the Gospel, chapters 1–8. Why should this be?

Before answering that, it is worth making another observation. The same division between the two halves of the Gospel (1–8, 9–16) is found with respect to the occurrence of miracles. We have already noted how dominant these are in Mark, but once again it is only the first half in which they are dominant. After chapter 8 only two further miracles are recorded. What is going on?

## Mark's miracles

### Section 1 (chapters 1-8)

- Two exorcisms
- Nine healings
- Four nature miracles (including feedings)

### Section 2 (chapters 9-16)

- Only two miracles:  
Epileptic boy cured (9:14-29)  
Blind Bartimaeus given sight (10:46-52)

### Miracle summaries:

- 1:32-34,39
- 3:10-12
- 6:5,55,56

There is one more piece of the jigsaw that we need before we can posit an answer. If *'immediately'* is the dominant word of the opening and the first half of the Gospel, then *'handed over'* (variously translated as *'delivered'* or *'betrayed'*) is the hallmark of the end.

The two terms form a marked and, I suggest, a deliberate contrast. Whereas *'immediately'* characterises the *active* nature of Jesus' ministry—his indefatigable going, doing and saying—*'handed over'* marks a complete change. Jesus the actor and the agent, the subject of so much exhausting activity, becomes the passive object, handed over like some object between the various *'authorities'* until he is finally delivered to death itself. How great the contrast, then, between most of Jesus' ministry and the final week—a contrast that Mark is at pains to draw. Whereas Jesus had exhibited so much external energy and worked

## Two key words

### 'Immediately' in Chapter 1

1:10,12,18,20,21,28,29,30,42,43

Compare 1:3 ('straight', adjective not adverb)

### 'Delivered'/'betrayed' in Chapters 14, 15

14:10,11,18,21,41,42,44;

15:1,10,15 (cf. 13:9,11,12; 9:31; 10:33)

so many miracles during his ministry, it is as if that tremendous energy is internalised as Jesus approaches his passion, so that he can find the strength of mind to suffer and to bear it. To allow himself to be *'handed over'* and betrayed, to be *'delivered up'* so passively and willingly, required an internal strength as great as the phenomenal activities that had preceded it. The miracles of the first half of the Gospel give way to an even more significant miracle, the subjection of Jesus to his own death upon the cross.

The first thirteen chapters of Mark present a series of events, and the initial impression one gets is that any of these could be taken out or reorganised, and the overall effect of the Gospel would remain little changed.<sup>3</sup> However, once chapter 13 is reached the narrative becomes altogether more connected. The narrative bumpiness (and apparent disconnectedness) that characterises most of the Gospel slows and smooths. Chapters 13–16 are a seamless and inexorable flow as the events of Jesus' suffering and death on behalf of his people are recounted.

### Truly the Son of God

The transition from active to passive, from *'immediately'* to *'handed over'*, is one important dynamic within the Gospel, but I want now to introduce another. It is the theme of the *identity of Jesus*. We can introduce it by comparing two passages, one at the beginning of the Gospel and one at the end, which form a thematic frame:

"And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens *opened*, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art

3. On closer examination it turns out that Mark does group and organise his material quite precisely, as can be illustrated by some of the tables, and by the gathering together of thematically related episodes. Nevertheless, as an initial impression one gets as a reader of Mark, the observation in the text does, I think, have validity. The change in style from chapter 13 is pronounced.

*My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased*" (1:10,11);

"And the veil of the temple was *rent in twain* from the top to the bottom. And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out, and gave up the [spirit], he said, Truly this man was *the Son of God*" (15:38,39).

There are two crucial points of connection here. The first is the identification of Jesus. At the outset (and only after Jesus' commitment to his Father is made in baptism), this testimony is given by the Lord God Himself. This means that as readers of the Gospel we are let into the secret of who in fact Jesus is right at the beginning, and with the seal of heaven. At the end—and in almost perfect contrast—the confession is made by a Roman soldier who has just played his part in Jesus' death. If such a man can recognise his Lord then perhaps there is hope that we might as well.

The other point of connection is in the use of a rather special verb. At Jesus' baptism the heavens are "opened" (as AV has it), or, better, 'rent' or 'torn asunder', so that the Spirit-dove can descend. At Jesus' death the veil of the temple (which blocks the way to the most holy place where the glory of God dwells) is 'rent asunder' from the top to the bottom (same word, and notice the direction of the tearing). In both instances a connection is established through the work of Jesus between heaven and earth, between God and man. The two passages are clearly intimately connected.

But whereas Mark reveals to his audience the true nature of Jesus' identity, and the work of access he accomplishes, at the outset and the close of his work, much of the rest of the Gospel involves characters falling over themselves in ignorance of these facts. This is particularly to the fore in the first eight chapters, and is developed as follows.

Everyone's reaction to Jesus is one of wonder and amazement; this is a key theme that merits chasing through the Gospel (1:22; 2:12; 5:15; 6:2; 7:37, etc.). Yet very few go on to draw the

## Lack of understanding

### Jesus is misunderstood by:

- Family (3:21-35)
- Crowds (4:10-12)
- Gerasenes (5:17)
- Home town (6:1-6)
- Religious leaders (7:6; 8:11,12)
- Disciples (4:13; 6:52; 7:18; 8:17,18)

logical conclusion as to who he must therefore be. They are so busy being astonished that they fail to recognise his identity. In fact, they rarely even ask the question, Who is this that can do such things?

Those who *do* perceive it are commanded by Jesus not to tell anyone publicly about it. This theme of the so-called 'Messianic secret' (the secret being Jesus' identity as the Christ and Son of God) is another dominant motif in Mark. The point seems to be that people have to come personally to their own conclusions, and if they are too blind to do so they do not deserve to be told.<sup>4</sup>

Ironically, the people who do recognise and proclaim Jesus as the Son of God are those possessed by devils (another Mark theme). Human nature is shown to be a perverse material when the sane are outclassed by the insane!

Throughout Mark 1–8 Jesus is constantly misunderstood, misidentified, and misinterpreted (see box below left for some key passages on this). This all comes to a head in a classic passage in Mark 8:17,18 in which Jesus harangues his disciples with a series of questions that capture their blindness. How wonderful, then, when Peter finally gets it right in his rocklike proclamation of Jesus as the Christ in 8:29, the centrepiece of Mark's Gospel! This passage not only uses the term 'Christ' for the first time in the Gospel after 1:1, it also bridges the gap between the two proclamations of Jesus' identity at baptism and crucifixion which we have already considered and which frame the Gospel.

Yet Peter is only half-way there, even as we are only half-way through the Gospel. His confession is bittersweet, for though he gets the label right (Jesus is indeed "the Christ"), he fails to understand what the term really means in his satanic obstruction to the way of the cross. His eyes are half open, but there is a lot more that must still be learned. Small wonder, then, that this incident is preceded by the two-stage healing of the blind man (8:22-26). The disciples, like that man, are at a half-way house, seeing men as trees walking. The Lord must complete the healing process so that they may perceive the full beauty of his work.

### Second stage: chapters 8–16

So we come to the second half of the Gospel, chapters 8–16. Whereas we could with some

4. I wrote about this topic at length in a *Testimony* Special Issue. See "We preach Christ crucified", May 2000, p. 215.

## ‘Sandwiches’

The following are examples of two connected events (the first and third columns) which are separated by a ‘central’ episode.

Mark appears to use this structure quite a lot. It may create suspense between opening and resolution (first and third), or it may be a device to highlight the importance of the central section.

3:20,21	3:22-30	3:31-35
5:22-24	5:25-34	5:35-43
6:7-13	6:14-29	6:30
11:12-14	11:15-19	11:20,21
14:1-2	14:3-9	14:10,11
14:53,54	14:55-65	14:66-72

justification consider chapters 1–8 as a thematic block, we need to differentiate the contents of the second half a little more precisely, although it is broadly true that they focus upon and lead towards the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus, which is central to his identification and role as the Christ—the identification that Peter correctly makes in the first chapter of this section. If the first half of the Gospel is about whether or not people can get the title of Jesus right, the second is about what that title means.

Chapters 8 and 10 both contain the healing of a blind man, which can be paralleled with the opening of the eyes of the disciples to understand the true nature of their Lord’s role (in a sense these two healings bind the topic of the cross in chapters 8–10 together). In this section Jesus repeatedly returns to his sufferings, explaining to his disciples how the Son of Man must suffer and be betrayed into the hands of evil men. This is a new topic for the Gospel, one which enters the instant Peter has correctly identified Jesus as the Christ. All the passion predictions in the Gospel are to be found in these chapters, and along with them the message that the disciples must follow where their Lord has led. It is a path of suffering, cross-bearing, and self-denial (8:34-38; 9:42-50; 10:23-31,35-45). Meanwhile (and in painful juxtaposition), the disciples continue to dispute who will be the greatest. Jesus’ message is one which they really don’t want to hear. The message of the cross and the concept of self-denying discipleship is indeed a stumblingblock.

As we move into chapters 11–13 the conflict between Jesus and the leaders comes prominently to the foreground. Tension builds, and Jesus’ ministry draws to a close as we enter the final week. Here we see the hatred of man for anything that challenges his status quo, his pride, and his authority. Here we see from a human point of view how it could be that men could rise up to put the Son of God to death.

And with that we have arrived at the final few days: the Passover in chapter 14, the tragic suffering and death, and then—finally—the glorious resurrection. Whereas chapters 8–10 expounded the theory and prospect of the cross, chapters 14–16 describe its agony and its glorious consequences.

### Over to you

In conclusion, it is worth noticing that the Gospel is drawn together at its opening and closing by an emphasis upon personal response. Mark’s opening quotation—at first sight designed primarily to introduce the work of John the Baptist—actually addresses and challenges the audience of the Gospel, which must include readers today. The quotation says, “Prepare *ye* the way of the Lord, make His paths straight” (1:3). The two imperatives ‘*prepare*’ and ‘*make*’ are addressed to *us*; it is by our reception, our response and our lives, in a very significant sense, that his path is made plain and his course worthwhile. So many people in the Gospel, through their lack of spirituality and discernment, caused disappointment and even frustration for our Lord (witness the crux in chapter 8 and some of the themes we have been considering). It is within our power and our response to at least in some measure ensure that his mission is fulfilled and his course completed. We too have an involvement, whether as obstacles and satans or as helpers and disciples, in the marvellous work Jesus is carrying out.

At the end of the Gospel the challenge is similar. Chapter 16 emphasises the new beginning that the resurrection brings. It is a new morning of a new day (vv. 2,9), but, more than a new day, it is the dawning of a new era, a new creation. The sun has risen on this day upon a world in which God has begun to make all things new. The instructions to the disciples, and the challenges given in that final chapter, should be taken in that light. The death of Jesus and the new beginning of resurrection have brought to light a wonderfully new set of opportunities in which we may each participate.