

The Mysterious Kingdom of Suffering Servants

A Journey Through The Gospel of Mark

Lesson 1

Approaching the Gospel of Mark

Picture the Lion. An uncomfortable image in the Bible, a lion is untamed and unruly. He appears, often out of nowhere, to exact revenge when provoked. It is difficult (if not impossible) to follow his rapid pace. Yet, at the same time, one gains a sense of calming reassurance to know that the “king of beasts” watches over the fields, doing what he wills, yet ready to pounce when an intruder approaches.

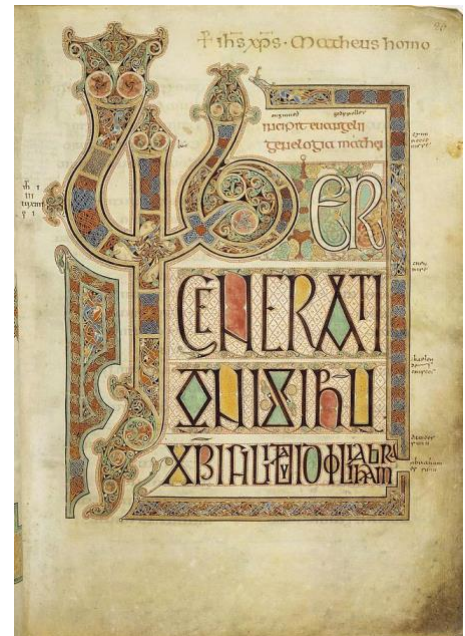
Perhaps you remember reading C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*? Aslan, the mighty lion, is meant to remind us of Jesus—but perhaps not in the way you might have thought. Mr. Beaver explains to Lucy that Aslan is powerful, and not to be tamed.

“Then he isn’t safe?” said Lucy.

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver, “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

It might be hard to get the “flannel board” Jesus out of our heads. A Jesus with rosy cheeks, always with a wink and a smile, petting little lambs and children. It doesn’t take long to realize that this Jesus is hardly...crucifiable! The Gospels portray Jesus in multiple dimensions—and we must allow each writer their full due, so that we might get a clearer picture of a Jesus who is both believable and crucifiable. A Jesus who could win over prostitutes and tax-collectors, but also threaten the powers of heaven and earth and shake the very foundations of both.

And that brings us to the lion. Just off the northeast coast of England lies a tiny island known as Lindisfarne. In 700 AD, the monks of Lindisfarne Castle published a remarkably beautiful edition of the four gospels—with magnificent artwork in extravagant detail. For each gospel, an artistic portrait represents the author seated, busy at work in composing their respective gospels. And over each head is a figure used to represent the character and purpose of their writing. The figure over Matthew’s head has a human face, just as Jesus in Matthew’s gospel is more than a rabbi, but the human face of God—the teacher and revealer who has dominion and authority as God’s Son. Over Luke’s head is an ox, the bearer of burdens: not just for domestic labor, but also serving as the sacrifice for the burden of sin (Lev. 3:4-21). In a similar way, Jesus in Luke’s gospel is especially concerned with those on the outskirts of society—for the laborers in the fields, and is described as the innocent sacrifice for the sins of



the world. When John is portrayed, over his head flies an Eagle: majestic, soaring, and beautiful. Possessing an impressive wingspan and long-range vision, the Eagle is mysterious, yet well suited to offer a unique birds-eye view of the world from high above it; that is why Proverbs declares that the way of an eagle is beyond comprehension (Prov 30:18-19). A 9th century preacher named John Scotus Eriugena described the Jesus depicted in the Gospel of John as “the spiritual bird, fast-flying, God-seeing.” And, indeed, Jesus in John’s gospel comes “from above” and offers heavenly wisdom for his chosen ones.



And, above Mark’s head, the monks of Lindisfarne placed a mighty lion. This is a remarkably accurate symbol for this powerful book. Mark’s gospel moves at a very rapid pace: Mark packs the life of Christ into a work shorter than all the other gospels. And Mark himself seems to be in a hurry; not only does he frequently use the word “immediately”, but almost every verse (in the original language) begins with the word “and”-- though our English translations remove them to smooth out the reading. Just think of a 5-year old tells you about her day, barely leaving room to breathe (“And then we went here—and then we did this---and then we went there...”), and you will have a good feel for what it is like to read Mark in Greek! But there is more to Mark than the speed of pace; the Jesus that Mark describes is one who will not be tamed! While Matthew is careful to smooth many rough edges (though not all!) concerning Jesus and the Jewish legal codes, Mark’s Jesus runs roughshod over the

traditions of the elders—and doesn’t bother to give an explanation. While Luke prefers high literary terms (being the only New Testament writer to use the optative mood) and is very particular with his choice of words (referring to the lame man’s bedding not simply as a ‘bed’ but as a ‘palate’—the precise term), Mark portrays Jesus in language that is simple, earthy, rugged, and, sometimes,...even wild. Jesus spits and growls, sends demons into a herd of pigs, talks cryptically about a kingdom that grows mysteriously and on its own (Mk 4:26-29), and challenges the power of the Roman empire by offering an opening verse that...if said aloud...could get you killed! When you read Mark, you will notice that he uses striking, visual language that is meant to create “word pictures” and rally Christian disciples behind Jesus, the servant of God.

In this first lesson, let me introduce the background to the Gospel of Mark by making eight observations.

1. Mark was likely the first written gospel. Perhaps you’ve noticed that Matthew, Mark, and Luke are similar, while John seems to be doing something very different than the others. For this reason, the first three are called the “synoptic” gospels (from a greek word meaning “to see together”). But comparing these three gospels raises 3 interesting questions—which has led scholars to speak of the “synoptic problem” (or “puzzle”).

First, in some cases whole paragraphs in all three gospels are word-for-word identical in the Greek text. This is striking because the gospels likely originated in different parts of the Mediterranean world, and likely at different times. Second, there are places where Matthew and Luke are word-for-word identical in material which does not appear in Mark's gospel at all! Other times, Matthew and Luke tell the same story in different ways, while Mark is silent. The third jagged edge in the puzzle concerns material that appears in one gospel only. Why does Matthew, for example, find it necessary to spend 4 chapters on Jesus' prediction concerning the fall of Jerusalem, whereas Mark spends only 1 or 2 chapters on this material? Why does Luke spend 3 chapters (9-11) dealing with material that is covered in 6 verses by Mark? And how do these strange differences connect with portions that are word-for-word identical?

Such a "puzzle" has led some scholars to suggest some type of relationship among the writers or the writer's material. But what was this relationship? The best way to begin piecing the puzzle together is to start with the facts. Here are five things that we know:

- (a) Mark is the shortest gospel of the three, and in ancient writing, shortest often implies earliest (since our inclination is to expand and explain, rather than cut material).
- (b) Luke claims to have used "sources" in collecting and writing his material (Luke 1:1-4).
- (c) 90% of Mark's gospel re-appears in Matthew (50% in Luke).
- (d) Mark's material appears in the same places (contexts) in Matthew and Luke; whenever either Matthew or Luke adds material, so does the other!
- (e) When Matthew and Luke use material that is not found in Mark, they almost never use the same material in the same Markan context. That is, if Luke tells extra story "A" right after Mark's account of parable B, Matthew tells that same extra story "A" in a different part of his gospel (maybe after Healing C). This fact suggests that Matthew and Luke had access to similar (if not the same) information, but used it differently than Mark's material.



There seem to be 5 possible "solutions" to the synoptic puzzle.

- (a) First, you could simply deny that any puzzle exists—claiming that the Holy Spirit spoke what He wanted when He wanted, and that's all we need to know. But this is actually to take a very low view of inspiration. Luke says that he used sources, and a high view of inspiration takes the author's claims seriously.
- (b) Second, you could say that all 3 writers borrow from memorized oral tradition, rather than using each other. But we have long sections (such as Mark 2:1-3:6) which appears in the same wording and the same order...but in different places in Matthew and Luke! This 'cut-and-paste' technique seems to imply they were using a written source.
- (c) Third, you could appeal to the order in the Bible: that Matthew was first, Mark used Matthew, and Luke used both. But this doesn't actually work. Matthew and Luke agree in their differences with Mark to such an extent that to place Mark in the middle of Matthew and Luke creates what some scholars believe to be an insurmountable problem.
- (d) Fourth, you could put Mark last, claiming it is a "Reader's Digest" version of the essential Gospel--what is common to Matthew and Luke. In response to this approach, a number of criticisms have been suggested. For example, why would Mark leave out any reference to the birth of Jesus—an event which covers two whole chapters in both Matthew and Luke?

Why would Mark include one-line (or one-word) additions to the material that were often crude, or that would create more confusion rather than clarification?

- (e) The fifth approach, generally accepted among New Testament scholars today (which is no guarantee of its correctness!) is Markan priority. This view claims that Mark's gospel preceded the others, and served as the basis upon which Matthew and Luke expanded in creating their own gospels. Thus Mark served as the common source for Matthew and Luke.

If you take this view (as I do), it offers some fascinating insights. It appears that God's work of inspiration does not detract from his willingness (and desire) to work through human efforts. The use of literary sources in composing the gospels may suggest that God values human reason and diligence of study. It means that Mark may have actually created the genre of a "Gospel"—a new kind of biography that is intended not only to commemorate the hero of the story, but to declare him as Lord, and describe the kind of life required for all who follow him. And, finally, it means that each gospel writer is more than simply a biographer of the life of Jesus. They are preacher, teachers, and theologians, telling a story intended for their audience. Since each writer is selective concerning which material is essential to their individual goals, we must let the individual voices speak to us. This leads me to my second point.

2. Mark has his own story to tell. When scholars first pieced together the synoptic puzzle, they came to the wrong conclusion that Mark's gospel is obsolete. They thought that since 90% of Mark is reproduced in the other gospels, it ought to be seen as a bland painter's palette from which Matthew and Luke wrote their respective portraits, replacing Mark. It is true that Mark was the least read and least popular gospel in the early church period. Most early Christians were Jewish, and Matthew's gospel speaks directly to Jewish Christians. As the gospel spread throughout the Empire, the sophisticated style of Luke became a favorite among Gentile Christians. But like the "sword in the stone" (of Disney movie fame), the Gospel of Mark may have lay hidden, but waits to be awakened—full of power and fury. The lion will not be tamed! And we will do well to pay attention to Mark's unique voice.



And what is Mark's unique voice? One emphasis is the mysterious nature of the kingdom of God. While in Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks in parables to explain and make clear, just the opposite occurs in Mark, where Jesus speaks in parables to confound outsiders with cryptic mystery (Mk 4:10-12). The "mystery" or "secret" of the kingdom belongs to those who are not stumped or fooled by the riddles. The parables in Mark are not simply recordings of Jesus' speeches; they act to confirm or confound the listener as well! Consider also the strange and awkward moments throughout the Gospel where Jesus commands silence from those who wish to tell of his great actions (5:43; 8:30). Scholars call this "the Messianic secret." Mark's intention is to remind the reader that a faulty view of Jesus (one based in power and warfare rather than service and suffering) will lead to a faulty proclamation of Jesus—no matter how good our intentions may be. We must know Jesus as the suffering servant if we want to make sense of his miraculous power.

And Mark presents a gospel for everybody—a theme that is "weaved" throughout the gospel. In several different contexts in Mark's narrative, Jesus is able to redefine custom, tradition, and law

(2:18; 2:23-3:6; 7; 10:1-9), eat with tax collectors and sinners (2:15-17), and associate with Gentiles (3:8; 5:1-20; 7:25-30; 8:1-9) and others considered unclean or impure (1:40-45; 5:23-34). Jesus heals and exorcises demons in various places: in synagogues (1:23-27, 39; 3:1-5; 6:5), cities (1:32-34, 38; 6:56), on land (6:56), and at sea (3:7-12). Therefore, when Jesus acts similarly in Gentile areas (5:1-20; 7:24-30) is only a continuation of his mission. In the presence of Christ, all onlookers are amazed or astounded at his power and authority (1:22, 27; 2:12; 5:42; 6:2, 51; 7:37; 9:15; 10:24, 26; 11:18).

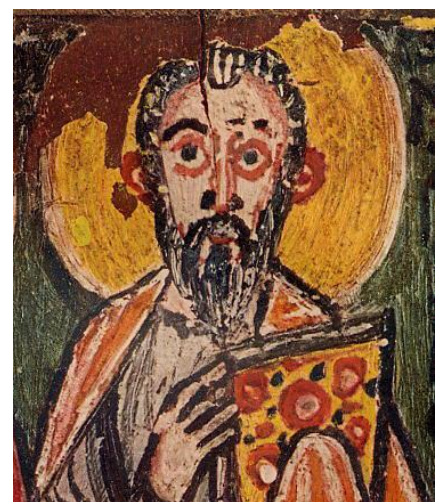
Jesus echoes the cries of the Hebrew prophets that justice and mercy take precedence over rituals and regulations (Jer 7:4-5; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8). Jesus does not heal because one is a Jew, or a Gentile—but because one is a person, made in the image of God (Mk 7:37; cf. Gen 1:31).

3. Tradition claims that Mark’s gospel is, in reality, Peter’s sermon notes. You may not have noticed, but only two of the four Gospels are attributed to apostles—Matthew and John. Do you find that strange? Do you find it odd to suppose that the first written gospel, used by the church and placed into the canon of Scripture, was penned by someone other than an Apostle?

There is little doubt that the same tradition that attached the name “Mark” to this gospel assumed it was John Mark—the young companion of Paul (Col. 4:10; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11) who accompanied Paul and Barnabus on their first missionary journey (Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13; 15:36-41). You might think he is an unlikely choice to be the author of the first written gospel. Why wouldn’t the first gospel come from the first Gospel preacher (after Jesus): namely, Peter?

Well that is exactly what the tradition actually says! The earliest argument on record defending the authenticity of Mark’s Gospel was penned in the year 125 by a man named Papias, who was the bishop of Hierapolis. Within his 5-volume work entitled *The Sayings of the Lord*, Papias claims that he learned some valuable information from “the presbyter” about Mark’s gospel. He says that this same John Mark served as Peter’s interpreter and scribe: not only documenting Peter’s preaching, but writing everything down in the same order and manner as a way to preserve Peter’s preaching style! Here are his actual words:

And the Presbyter used to say this, ‘Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote accurately all that he remembered, not, indeed, in order, of the things said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord, nor had he followed him, but later on, as I said, followed Peter, who used to give teaching as necessity demanded but not making, as it were, an arrangement of the Lord’s oracles, so that Mark did nothing wrong in thus writing down single points as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave attention, to leave out nothing of what he had heard and to make no false statements in them.’



This connection between Mark and Peter appears in second century writer Irenaeus, and the third century writers Tertullian, Origen, and Clement of Alexandria—all of whom may simply have

passed along Papias' comments. But also in the second century, Justin (who is often named Justin Martyr because of his death on behalf of his faith) refers to the "memoirs" of Peter, and later uses the term "memoirs" to refer to the written Gospels.

Do we have good reason to believe the tradition? Sure we do. Every copy of Mark ever found contains the title "According to Mark". There is every reason to think that John Mark is probably the one referred to as "my son Mark" in 1 Peter 5:12-13. And we know that Peter visited the home of John Mark's mother in Acts 12:12. Just as Peter's preaching in the book of Acts begins with John's baptism, the Gospel of Mark begins not with the birth of Christ, but his baptism at the hands of John. And the collection of verses strung together with "and's" might suggest seed thoughts, sermon nuggets...the kind of thing that you would expect if you were reading someone's sermon notes. Besides, if the book was actually penned by someone else, why would the early church invent such a convoluted story involving the (less than blameless) John Mark? So, let's take the tradition seriously and imagine what this might tell us.

4. Mark's gospel is meant to be read aloud...and in one sitting. It might be hard for us to imagine, but in the first century the majority of people were illiterate. The way people learned information was through hearing things read aloud to them. If Mark's gospel is actually collected sermon notes from Peter, preserving Peter's style, there is all the more reason for us to read the gospel out loud—to hear it as it was meant to be heard! And if you try it, you'll find that you will not be able to read quietly. The book's power and fast-pace will overtake you! Can you imagine...in a world where the birthday of Caesar (who was called "Son of God" on all the coins) was proclaimed as "the beginning of the good news", someone comes along...stands on a box in the middle of a field, and proclaims loudly "the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God!" (Mk 1:1). The very first verse was tantamount to insurrection! What a powerful book.



And the book is packaged together in such a way that you ought to read it straight through. Just as the book (nearly) opens with the heavens torn apart as the spirit descends on Christ, the book (nearly) ends with the veil of the temple ripped apart as the spirit of Jesus ascends back to the Father. The Jesus who exemplifies power over every conceivable thing (in Mark 1-8) becomes the Messiah who gives up power and takes up a cross (in Mark 9-16). Read the story through and get the full picture.

5. Mark can be divided into three "acts" like in a play. Think of the Gospel of Mark like a dramatic play in three acts: Act 1 could be titled "A Savior with power over everything" (1:1-8:26), while Act 2, in true dramatic fashion, could ironically be called "A Savior who gives up power over anything" (8:27-16:8). Act 3 is the most mysterious of all: "how will this story end?"

ACT 1

Chapter 1. Mark's gospel begins with an eruption like a giant volcano. The world into which the story is born included emperor worship and Roman superiority. An inscription dating to 9 BC (2 years before the birth of Christ) proclaims about the Emperor Augustus: "The birthday of the god began for the world the announcements of good news that have gone forth because of him."

Against a backdrop which declared the beginning of good news began with the birthday of the divine Augustus, Mark begins his subversive gospel with the words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark wastes no time in this fast-paced gospel, skipping over any birth story and beginning, rather, with Jesus’ baptism in which the heavens are “ripped apart” (like an old piece of cloth). He is borrowing from Isaiah 64:1 (“O, that you would rip the heavens apart and come down!”); God has come down and is about to do his work in the person of Jesus Christ. At the end of the gospel (Mk 15:37-39), as Jesus dies on the cross, he will give up the “spirit”, the veil of the Temple will be “ripped apart”, and the Centurion will declare that Jesus is, in fact, the “Son of God.” Thus, the mission of Jesus, given in the beginning of the story, is completed through his death on the old Roman cross. We not only find the theme of Jesus’ messiahship, but also the role of discipleship here at the very beginning of the narrative. John the Baptist, we are told, “prepares the way” for Jesus. Both Jesus and John appear in the desert; both preach repentance and baptism for the forgiveness of sins; both will be bound and killed for their faith. Discipleship, we learn, is to be like Jesus—and to follow him in suffering, even to the point of death.

Believe it or not, such a call was not original with Jesus. The “would-be Messiahs” who populated Judea before and after Jesus talked rebellion against the Romans government, claimed to be the sent-one to lead such a rebellion, and compelled the people (in the style of the Maccabean martyrs) to give up their lives in the cosmic fight against Rome (good vs. evil). In fact, Jesus’ call had both social and political implications, and the comparison between Jesus’ words and that of the military leaders is uncanny! Josephus, a first century Jewish general, wrote that he was aware of a plot to form a coup, ousting him as the leader. Yet all would be forgiven if this young man would “repent and believe (that is, prove their allegiance) in me” (Josephus, The Life 110). This was, apparently, the common call to join a rebel band. Anyone listening to Jesus proclaim, “the time has come; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mk 1:15), would hear in Jesus’ words a call to trust his way of being God’s chosen vessel to win out over the evil empire and usher in God’s new world. The language was the same...but what Jesus meant by it was radically different than anything they had ever heard before. The call to suffer and die had always been interpreted as “fight to the death; and if you die, so be it.” Jesus will show, by his teachings and his actions, that God’s call is “resist the fight; volunteer your death; and in losing your life, God will have his brand new world.”

After the exciting prologue (1:1-15), Mark begins his record of the Galilean ministry of Jesus, the mystery-working Son of God, who comes onto the scene “clearing the earth of demons” (to borrow a phrase from Käsemann). In chapters one through four, the reader notices both conflict and acceptance (which will continue throughout the narrative). Jesus drives out an evil spirit who declares Jesus to be “the Holy one of God” (Mk 1:24). In Mark’s Gospel, demons know who Jesus is. The crowd is stunned by Jesus’ miracles and his teaching (1:27). Thus, we learn about Jesus by listening to what he says, and also by watching what he does. Jesus continues his acts of healing, as Mark casts Jesus in the role of a miracle-working faith healer. But when we hear about Jesus’ messiahship, the call to discipleship is close at hand. The angels “attended to” Jesus (1:13). Immediately after being healed, Peter’s mother in law “began to wait on them” (1:31). The only response after being in the presence of Jesus is service and submission.

Chapter 2. But not everyone responds with service. Jesus also faces hostile forces, and hostile people. In Mark 2:6, Jesus does what no human could claim to do—forgive sins on the spot (Isa 43:25; 44:22)! Assuming the judgment of God was an offense deserving death. Yet Mark is declaring that Jesus bears within himself the spirit of God, and as he glides over the earth he announces God’s message in his wake. But remember—whenever we see Jesus’ messiahship, discipleship is at hand. Jesus does not call himself “Son of God” but “Son of Man”—a phrase used in the Old Testament for kings, prophets, and Israel...whoever served as God’s vehicle for a particular mission. Jesus is declaring that his role—that of announcer of God’s message—is not peculiar to him; there will be others who will do in their world what Jesus did in his world. Now, just who would that be? When Jesus says in verse 17 “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners”, he is giving a programmatic statement: this is what it means to serve as the herald and harbinger of God’s message; this is the kingdom of God: God at work—not in the righteous—but in sinners!

Chapter 3. The message of Jesus is difficult for the self-styled “righteous” in any generation. In chapter 3, some were standing by to accuse Jesus (to get this trouble-maker out of our midst). Jesus, faced with the opportunity to heal a man on the Sabbath, asks a simple question, “which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?” (3:4). Jewish rules of the day actually prescribed and demanded that Jews should save life, even on the Sabbath [Ben Yoma 85b: “saving life overrules the Sabbath.” Even a sore throat could be cured, if life-threatening (m. Yoa 8:6)!]. But the man who Jesus healed had a “shriveled hand” – not a life-threatening illness! But somehow Jesus does consider this a life-and-death matter. The twist, it seems, is that the real “healing” that needs to be done this Sabbath is saving souls. By their stubborn and rebellious hearts (3:5), the crowd proves they will not be “saved” today; they are rejecting the announcement of God—and bringing death to themselves. Already (at 3:6), we find the Pharisees and the Herodians (two groups who did not like each other) finding common ground in the desire to remove the threat to their power and position. They begin the plot to kill the King of Kings.

Jesus find support by some, hostility by others. Jesus is even alienated by his own family (3:21), but he calls and claims those who would receive him (“and do the will of God”—3:34) as his family, the true insiders (3:13-19, 31-35; cp. 10:28-30). In verses 31 & 32, Jesus had a crowd seated around him, while his mother and brothers stood “outside” and “sent someone in to call him.” Jesus calls “those seated around him” insiders. Friends, Jesus does the calling! And only those willing to sit at his feet, inside the community, will learn from him.

Chapter 4. In 4:1-34, Jesus teaches in parables (though not here exclusively). Mark implies that Jesus used parables to cloud rather than clarify his teaching, which is Isaiah’s point (Isa 6:10; Matthew 13:13 makes a different point entirely). Those outside cannot understand the message since they do not accept Jesus. The parables then serve to repel those who do not accept Jesus (4:12). This is part of Mark’s overall message: nothing happens without God’s permission (see 5:13), and God reveals himself to those who commit (4:34). The parables of chapter 4 speak both of messiahship and discipleship. In the parable of the sower, the reader is never told who the sower is—even though God is implied. But God works through Christ, and Christ through the disciples—all of whom share the message of Christ. In fact, the only parable which appears only in Mark (4:26-29) proves that the disciple does not plan, organize, strategize, or orchestrate the growth of the kingdom, as the other parables suggest. God’s kingdom is a wild kingdom! It grows on its own

terms, and we see the effects of God through his people, and give all glory to God. God's kingdom does not come through swift military action, but in God's time, in God's way. Such reliance on God is the opposite of fear, as illustrated by Jesus sleeping in the midst of the storm (4:35-41).

Chapters 5-8a. Beginning with 4:35, the narrative moves toward the confession at Caesarea Philippi. Jesus is opposed by the pig-owners (5:16-17, the only miracle story ending with violent rejection of Jesus), opposed in his own town (6:1-6) and opposed by the Pharisees and scribes (7:1-23). Yet ordinary people respond to Jesus in faith—the former demoniac who becomes the first missionary (5:20), the Syrophenician woman who responds submissively even as the brunt of a joke (7:24-30), and the deaf mute (7:31-37; cp. Isa 35:6-7). And Jesus heals people from the fringes of society, an ostracized woman and the daughter of a wealthy nobleman (5:21-43). A seeming “outsider” views the events of Jesus from the perspective of the resurrection (6:14), adding to the irony of the book.

As Jesus announces who he is, the reader learns about the demands...and the costs of discipleship. The disciples are sent out carrying nothing but faith in their hearts (6:7-13), John the Baptist is killed, foreshadowing the death of Jesus (6:14-29), and the disciples, thinking only of their own abilities, are commanded to use their faith in God to feed the multitudes (6:36-37). Yet the disciples, given the secret inside knowledge of the kingdom, fail to hear and fail to follow. Throughout this section, the disciples show dull senses and lack of understanding (5:31; 6:52; 7:18). In 6:52, the Is. 6:9-10 passage (which in Mk. 4:12 applied to outsiders) is applied to the disciples. Their lack of response and attentiveness prompts Jesus to ask them point blank, “do you not yet perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear, and do you not remember? Do you not yet understand?” (8:17-21). A Syrophenician woman follows Jesus just for the crumbs that fall from the table; the disciples fail to believe even after collecting 12 baskets full of “crumbs”—one basket for every faithless disciple. So the first section of Mark (nearly) ends with one question asked by Jesus: “Do you still not understand?” (8:21)

ACT 2

Chapter 8b. The next section begins at 8:27. But sandwiched between the first section and the last is a little story about a blind man. This interesting healing which includes partial sight on the journey to full sight is followed by a confession which is only partly understood by the disciples. The question to begin section 2 is simply, “who do you say that I am?” (8:29).

Perhaps by now you have noticed Jesus' common summons to silence. When Jesus heals someone, he doesn't want them to tell about it. When someone makes a confession revealing Jesus' name, origin, and mission, he wants it hushed. There are many theories about this “messianic secret” (which is only “messianic” in 8:30!); one which best fits the message of Mark is that a partial gospel is no gospel at all. A “low fat, low calorie gospel” is one that involves glory, power, and triumph without suffering, submission, forgiveness, acceptance, and death. It doesn't matter how much we hear the stories about Jesus, we do not understand the kingdom of God, or who Jesus is, until we see him on the cross. And, according to Mark, it's not until we see him from our own cross that the message of discipleship will sink into our hearts. Until we are ready to give all, we are not ready to be his disciple.

Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Christ [Messiah]" (8:29) meant that Jesus is the military figure sent to destroy the evil empire—Rome (with might); but when Jesus teaches about his suffering, betrayal, and death (and he teaches them "plainly about this")—Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him (8:32). There is nothing more satanic than to deny Jesus his mission (8:33); it is equally satanic to expect less of his disciples—including ourselves. Discipleship is denial; its suffering; its death. A disciple is not simply prepared "if" suffering comes; he chooses the path of suffering, and denies every alternative, every escape, so that God may be glorified through our surrender. Anything less is an act of embarrassment and shame concerning the role of Jesus (8:38).

Chapters 9-10. The kingdom of God, which Jesus announced to be near or "at hand" would come within the vision and lifetime of "some standing here" (9:1). Mark's view of the kingdom of God is simply "God's world entering into and taking over our world." Thus it is near when Jesus begins his mission (1:15), and it is present when Jesus acts (3:23-27). It remains a mystery (4:11) and comes unrecognized in its own time (4:26-29). Thus the kingdom is secretly present in the ministry of Jesus, but it will be made known publicly in the future. While this statement operates on many levels, at least one historical reference is the fall of Jerusalem, when God's judgment upon a faithless people would be seen in full bloom; only those willing to deny their identity and submit to Jesus' call would escape; those committed to "defending Israel against wicked Rome" would meet their fate in a fiery conflagration—and miss the power of a kingdom open for all, based on love...not hate.

The failure of the disciples continues. A man brought his son (stricken with an evil spirit) to Jesus. The disciples took it upon themselves to do the healing; even though they had power to do so (6:13), they could not (9:18). After the healing, the disciples wonder why they couldn't do the healing, failing to remember that only God (through fasting and prayer) does healing (9:28-29). It's not about us! Yet their concern was not praise for the healed boy, but personal recognition for the healing. They disciples continue to display their ignorance. They argue about which of them is the greatest (9:33-37), forbid good works done by non-apostles (8:38-41), yet fail to understand what Jesus says about himself (9:32). Jesus is fierce in his declaration that the fire of Gehenna is reserved for those who lead others toward self-promoting sin, rather than surrender to God (9:42-50). In chapter 10, Jesus teaches that God demands total surrender in marriage, total denial of trust in worldly goods, and recognition that every discipleship is a level-playing field; only selfless, child-like people will be used as empty vessels for the master. Meanwhile, after Jesus predicts his own death for the third time, the disciples are still thinking about their own greatness and position in the future triumph of Jesus (10:35-45). And once again, like a side-bar allusion, Mark talks about a single blind man – reminding us that the story is about those who see in faith, and those who are blinded by their own fear, self-promotion, and identity.

Chapters 11-15. In chapters 11-12, Jesus enters Jerusalem and it becomes apparent that the destruction which is to befall the city is due to their hard hearts and blind unbelief. In chapter 13, Jesus gives a chilling prophecy (albeit cryptic) concerning the fall of the great city. Chapters 14 and 15 speak of the Last supper, the garden in Gethsemane, the trials and the crucifixion—emphasizing the shame (more than the pain) of Jesus' suffering and humiliation (in keeping with Isaiah 53). Chapter 15 (nearly) ends with Jesus giving up the spirit, the veil being ripped apart, and the centurion declaring Jesus to be the Son of God. What is ripped apart cannot be mended!

Once the heavens are ripped apart, “the Father’s voice spreads everywhere” (Pseudo-Hippolytus, Theophany 6), and the chasm between heaven and earth is removed. God fills the world with himself; and he is ever present forevermore.

ACT 3

Chapter 16. This is the message of Mark. Chapter 16 is controversial, since the earliest witnesses suggest that the book ends at verse 8 (with no resurrection appearances, just a promise that you “will” see him in Galilee). Some include a different ending. Most later manuscripts include verses 9-20 (resurrection appearances and final instructions). Regardless of how Mark ends, the message is clear. Will our story end in fear...or assurance that God’s work through Jesus is still accomplished in the world through his people? Will we carry on the mission of the messiah...or be the “inside outsiders” like the disciples, who through our own blind ambition fail to see what Jesus is calling us to...a cross just our size.

6. Mark has two main themes.

Christ and the Cross. The question posed by Jesus in the middle of the book—“who do you say that I am?” (8:30)—is perhaps Mark’s most important question. The reader, of course, knows who Jesus really is (1:1, 11; 9:7), and outsiders like demons and gentiles recognize him. The disciples, however, do not. The reader is supposed to notice that how one views Jesus is a determining factor in the story. In the first half of book, Jesus is compared to a Hellenistic wonder-worker, using power of God to subdue forces of evil (Mk 1:1-8:26). The disciples, on the other hand, have been given to know the mysteries, but fail to comprehend (4:11, 14, 40; 6:52; 7:17-18; 8:4). They become “outsiders” (8:17-18) through failure to perceive. They mistake suffering for power. Jesus rebukes Peter (8:30) and the demons (3:12) who declare him to be the Son of God. But why? One clue is found in the term “Christos” (Messiah) which conjured up the image of a nationalistic power scheme (Psalms of Solomon 17:21-24, 26, 32). For Mark, the term Messiah must be redefined in terms of the Suffering Son of Man (8:31). The disciples’ identity is bound up with the suffering Messiah (8:34-35). In the 2nd half of book, the mighty works of Jesus nearly cease save for one exorcism (9:14-29), one healing (10:46-52) and the withering of a fig tree (11:12-13, 20-21). For Mark’s Jesus, working miracles seems to have become a distraction to his mission (9:19). Thus the cross is the controlling symbol for interpreting Jesus’ identity. The proper understanding of Jesus can only be discovered at the foot of the cross (as the Centurion rightly confesses). The cross is vicarious (10:45; 14:22-24), a sacrificial action, wherein Jesus gives up his own life for the sake of the people of God. Thus the human cause (12:12; 14:1-2; 15:10) and the divine necessity of the cross (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) are emphasized. We must see Jesus’ humanness – his willingness to be vulnerable. While many Christians today find Jesus’ deity the number one issue to defend, we must remember that the first heresy in the early church was a denial of Jesus’ humanity (Gnosticism). Jesus is angry, frustrated, and compassionate. His humanity allows us access into how to live the life of the kingdom of God.

Community and Discipleship. The nature of discipleship is one of servanthood. Those called into the kingdom are not called to fight for power and pecking order, but to follow the example of the cross (10:32-45). While Mark’s view of the human condition is grim, the call to discipleship is repeated over and over again. There is no focus on motivation, but rather simple external obedience

[only 1 reference to Spirit: 13:9-11]. The call to suffering discipleship is expected by those who will obey him. But how? It remains a mystery. The capacity to respond in obedience is a mysterious possibility granted by God (10:30-31; 4:26-29). Thus Mark gives a rigorously challenging account of the life of discipleship. One does not count future rewards (as disciples do), but simply obey the one who gives “a new teaching—with authority!” The ultimate vindication stays in the hands of God. The norm for discipleship is defined by the cross in terms of servanthood and obedience, not love (only mentioned in 12:28-34). Nowhere does Mark’s Jesus promulgate love as a distinctive mark of discipleship. Mark nowhere explicitly interprets the cross as an act of ‘love.’ The way of the cross is simply the way of obedience to God; discipleship demands that walk, regardless of the cost or consequences. The Christian, then, must recognize the demand for faith, and the call of discipleship as one of submissive servanthood.

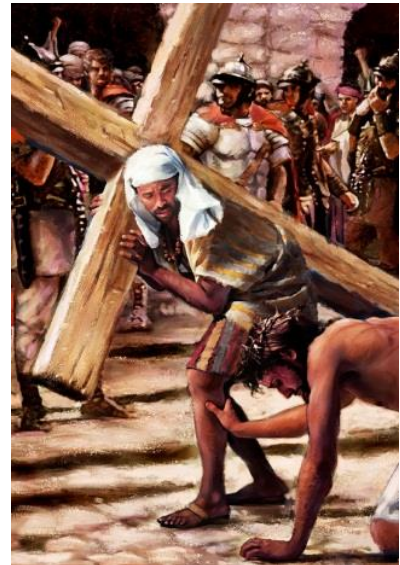
7. Mark has three main points.

First, Jesus is Lord—not in the sense of power, but in the suffering servant who gives up power.

Second, I am called to discipleship—not because of what I get out of it, but because of who He is. The Gospel of Mark is an action gospel, concerned not so much with what Jesus said (the other gospels record much more actual teaching), but what Jesus did. We are called to see Jesus as our example, and to follow in his steps.

These two key concepts—that Jesus is the Christ, and that he is worthy of committed disciples—seep through every page of Mark’s Gospel. He seeks to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, identifying him as the Son of God, and calling all readers to follow his example of exaltation through service, glory through suffering. In the face of failure, the disciple looks to Jesus as her source of triumphant vindication. Jesus knows the risk of human failure; yet he calls all who hear the message (and identify him as the Messiah) to join him in his divinely-appointed mission.

Third, the Master and his disciples are linked by the promise of suffering. The community that Mark is writing to is going through a period of suffering. And they need a word from God about how to interpret the suffering they are experiencing. Mark tells the story of Jesus as a model of what discipleship requires—intense suffering, leading to a cross.



The disciples would be baptized in the Holy Spirit (1:8) who would provide help in times of suffering (13:11), since the disciples would be “baptized” with the suffering of Christ (10:38). Jesus would suffer temptation from Satan in the wilderness (1:12-13) and in Caesarea Philippi (8:33). Mark reveals a death plot very early in Jesus’ ministry (3:6), suggesting he faced persecution from the beginning of his ministry as well. Jesus mentions tribulation and persecution in Mark 4:17, suggesting that discipleship involves both suffering and mission. John the Baptist knew suffering well (6:14-29), and Mark’s Jesus describes him as a forerunner in suffering (9:12). The ultimate example of suffering for Mark is the passion of Christ (his suffering and death), which

ushers in a period of suffering for the disciples. The three dramatic passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) are immediately followed by suffering predictions for the disciples (8:34-37; 9:33-50; 10:28-31, 35-45). Mark places the cross on center stage. He suggests through his dramatic presentation that victory is achieved through suffering, success through failure, and triumph through trial.

8. Mark is unique and concerned about spiritual formation. Let's stop thinking of the four Gospels as "four versions of the same thing." Let's try not to cut the gospels apart to tell "the life of Christ"—borrowing, story by story, from whichever author tells the story the way we most like to hear it. These are not simply four biographies; each book has its own story to tell, using Jesus as the central hero, but telling four different stories. They work together, but they are not same. God, in his infinite wisdom, wanted us to have one Jesus, but four Gospels. We owe it to Him to discover the subtlety and power in each voice.

Let Mark speak. His gospel is unique, earthy, fast-paced, powerful, and a bit wild. Like the king of beasts, the Jesus of Mark's gospel will not be tamed by any outside source; yet he willingly surrenders all of his power and might—over demons, disease, and death—to serve the will of God by going to the cross. The power of Jesus is seen in the king of all ages suffering in obedience to the will of God. And he calls a people who are willing to follow in His steps.

And so, the Gospel of Mark brings the wise reader to her knees. The starting place for all theology is God—the sovereign, holy Lord. He is above everyone and everything, and his will is beyond comprehension. He acts as He wills, and the only proper response from his Creation is total and utter surrender. One does not barter with God concerning rewards and punishments; God does not plead with humans, offering return for the time served. Instead, all of creation bows in silent reverence to the power of God, displayed primarily in Jesus of Nazareth. The student of the Word wishing to become more like the Master will find that the first step in the process of spiritual formation is to recognize that Jesus is Lord, and I am not. The call of discipleship is the compelling call of the crucified Lord; the kingdom of God demands my loyalty, not my complaints. The duty of the disciple is clear and direct: to choose the way of death to self. The cross is not simply a possible end—it is the call of the gospel. Will I surrender my foolish heart and give in to the Creator's demands? Are you ready to experience this call and demand? For this is the Gospel according to Mark.