

## INTRODUCTION TO THE GOSPEL OF MARK

by

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**Note:** Author's introduction in *The Gospel of Mark, An Exposition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1917). The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

Of the four Gospels, the one least frequently read or admired is that which bears the name of Mark. This was true, at least, in the earlier centuries, when the work was regarded as merely a brief copy of Matthew or of Luke. In later years, however, a new valuation has been given to this Gospel, and it has become customary to assign to Mark the first place in time of composition; and in vigor, strength, and vividness of style a position second to none. It is true that most of the material can be found in the other narratives. Possibly not more than fifty verses could be classed as peculiar to this version of the gospel story. Nevertheless, the most familiar scenes are given such added atmosphere and color, and there are so many original touches and unique features, that the incidents assume a new character, and the figure of Christ moves before us with a majesty and a reality which are unsurpassed.

Many explanations have been attempted to account for the distinguishing characteristics of this Gospel. The most common is the ancient tradition that it "was written for the Romans." The more probable suggestion attributes the peculiarities of the story to the personal character and experiences of the writer to whom, from the earliest centuries, this Gospel has been assigned.

John, a Jew by birth, who bore also the Roman surname of Marcus, or Mark, was a resident of Jerusalem, where his mother, Mary, a woman of considerable wealth, occupied a position of prominence and influence among the early Christians. He was therefore personally acquainted with the scenes and circumstances of the ministry of our Lord and may even have been a witness of some of its incidents, as tradition has identified him with the young man, to whom no other writer refers, who was clad with a linen cloth and who fled when Jesus was arrested. He evidently enjoyed the advantages of culture and religious training, and even the greater privileges of an intimate acquaintance with the leaders of the Church, who were frequent guests in the home of his mother. Barnabas, a wealthy, generous Levite from the island of Cyprus, was his cousin. Peter referred to him [Mark} as "my son," which possibly suggests that by this apostle he had been brought to follow Christ. Paul became acquainted with him when visiting in Jerusalem with Barnabas, and invited him to return with them to their important work in Antioch.

When Barnabas and Paul started on their missionary journey, they took Mark with them as their "minister" or "attendant." Just what the latter word may denote is not quite certain. Probably Mark arranged for the details of travel, for places of entertainment, and conveyances as a "helper" or business agent. He accompanied the apostles to Cyprus and thence across the sea to Perga; but from this point he turned back, to the great disappointment of Paul. Just what influenced this step is purely a matter of conjecture. That the motive was wholly creditable it would be difficult to prove, for when Paul was starting on his second missionary tour he refused to allow Mark to

accompany him because of what he regarded as a previous desertion, even though Barnabas stoutly defended the cause of Mark. So serious was this difference of opinion that it resulted in the separation of Paul and Barnabas. The former took Silas as his companion and the latter sailed with Mark for Cyprus.

Whatever of fault may be assigned to Mark for the act to which Paul objected, it is clear that he completely vindicated the confidence placed in him by Barnabas, and so conducted himself as to regain the trust and affection of Paul; for he was subsequently found in Rome sharing the imprisonment of Paul and was lovingly commended by him to the distant church of Colossæ. Mark also became the companion of Peter on his long missionary journeys; and this experience, like that of his earlier intimacy with this apostle, was of supreme importance in fitting him for his work as a Gospel writer. Shortly before the death of Paul a special message was sent through Timothy summoning Mark to Rome, as one upon whom Paul was specially dependent. Thus Keble could write:

Companion of the Saints! 'twas thine  
To taste that drop of peace divine  
When the great soldier of thy Lord  
Called thee to take his last farewell,  
Teaching the Church with joy to tell  
The story of your love restored.

It is possibly the story, also, of a life restored. It seems to relate an early failure in Christian service, which was redeemed by later devotion; and it tells us of one who finally gave to the world an imperishable record of the ministry of Christ.

Just here there may be a message for some who are reading this Gospel story today. The fault and unfaithfulness of the past may be pitiful, but it is possible to atone, to turn defeat into victory, even to become witnesses to the life and power of our Lord.

The experiences of Mark may go far toward explaining the unique character of his Gospel. He was a traveler. He had accompanied the apostles on their far journeys in various parts of the empire, and had continued for some time with Paul in Rome. He wrote, therefore, not solely "for the Romans" but for Christian readers in all lands. This accounts for his use of Roman words, for his translation of Aramaic terms, for his care to explain Jewish customs, and for his infrequent references to the Old Testament except when recording passages quoted by Christ.

Then, too, Mark was a friend and companion of the Apostle Peter. He was, according to tradition, an "interpreter of Peter," and from him he "received his gospel." This relationship explains the peculiar vividness and reality of his narrative. It is easy to imagine how often the long hours of their journeys were lightened by the stirring stories which Peter again and again would be asked to repeat to his eager young comrade, until Mark would actually see the scenes which he afterwards pictured in his Gospel. It is not strange that he wrote with all the graphic distinctness and vividness of an eyewitness and could give such complete details as to time and place and circumstance.

If you wish definite and full information as to any gospel incident, consult Mark. He will supply exact names, times, locations, numbers, colors. He will help you to reproduce the pictures. He will

paint for you even the looks and gestures and attitudes of Christ. He alone will tell you how the multitudes who were to be fed sat down in groups like flower beds "upon the green grass"; how our Lord amid the tempest was sleeping "on the cushion" in the stern of the boat; how when they brought unto him "little children," "he took them in his arms, and blessed them"; how "taking the child by the hand" he raised her from the sleep of death; how in the presence of the malignant Pharisees he healed the crippled hand "when he had looked round about on them with anger"; how when the rich young ruler stood before him "Jesus looking upon him loved him"; how in his own town of Nazareth Jesus "marveled because of their unbelief"; and how he "sighed" at the sight of blindness and sorrow. Only in Mark are we told that Jesus was a "carpenter," that during his temptation "he was with the wild beasts," that when the disciples saw him calm the sea "they feared exceedingly," that as they saw him turn so steadfastly toward Jerusalem and the cross "they were amazed, and they that followed were afraid"; that the angel in the empty tomb gave the joyful message, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter."

Then again, Mark was a servant who performed worthy and helpful ministries of love for the apostles, with whom he journeyed as their "minister" or "attendant." It was natural therefore that he should write a Gospel, the key verse of which seems to be "the Son of man also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." In harmony with such a central thought is the fact that in Mark, unlike John, no mention is made of the preexistence of our Lord; and unlike Matthew and Luke, nothing is recorded of his ancestry, birth, infancy, or early years. The great Servant stepped upon the stage already girded for his task. He moved forward with unwavering step, passing swiftly from scene to scene with the cross ever clearly before him. He "went about doing good," but with the tireless fidelity of one who realized that the time allotted for his work was brief, and that sacrifice is inseparable from the highest service.

The entire contents of this Gospel might be summed up in those words, "To minister, and to give his life." The first nine chapters picture his labors of love in Galilee. Over them we might write the legend, "To minister." The remaining chapters reveal him journeying to Jerusalem and passing through the experiences of Passion Week; and above them might well be inscribed the words, "To give his life." For whatever reason, Mark has drawn us a portrait of Christ which depicts him as the mighty "Servant of Jehovah" of whom Isaiah had written. However the fact is explained, he has given us the matchless Gospel of Service.

This service is one of strenuous activity. Task follows task with almost breathless rapidity. Every scene is one of life, movement, vigor. This impression is produced by the frequent use of verbs in the present tense. It is deepened by the surprising repetition of the conjunction "and," which begins two verses out of every three in the Gospel and occurs in practically every verse of some of its chapters. The characteristic word, however, is "straightway," which represents a term translated also as "forthwith" and "immediately." It is found in its Greek form forty-two times in this brief Gospel, more frequently, in fact, than in all the other books of the New Testament combined.

The restless activity is made more impressive by the constant mention of the multitudes which were ceaselessly surging about our Lord, so that Mark twice records the fact that Christ and his disciples "could not so much as eat bread." This is peculiarly the Gospel of the "crowds," which thronged the mighty Servant to secure his ready help and to hear his words. Yet amidst all this movement and activity there is no sign upon the part of Christ of worry or of haste. All his acts are dignified, deliberate, majestic. "Although he was the vortex of excited multitudes he never

showed a trace of hurry or excitement. Through all those crowded days of healing and controversy he never knew what it was to be flurried or distraught." Mark tells us, too, of ten different occasions on which Jesus withdrew to be alone with his disciples or with God. These periods were at times interrupted by the multitudes, but they prepared him for fresh and more exacting activities. They suggest an important lesson for his modern followers. They indicate the need of rest and of prayer if work is to be done well. His retirements were always recruitings for fresh service.

This service was marked by mighty works. It was accompanied by deeds of divine power. This Gospel is one of miracles rather than of parables. Of the former, nineteen are recorded, two of which are peculiar to Mark, while of the latter we find only four. It may be contrasted with Matthew where we find twenty-one miracles and fifteen parables, and with Luke which records twenty miracles and nineteen parables. Nor is it merely the number of miracles which is significant; but as Mark relates them, he surrounds them by circumstances which make us feel how deep was the impression produced upon those who witnessed these marvels, and how really super-natural these witnesses believed them to be.

Possibly it is most of all to be noticed how Mark emphasizes the frequent presence of demons, and how powerless these evil spirits were in the presence of Christ. We are reminded of the words of Peter relative to the Master: "God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him." Chapter after chapter of this Gospel closes with an impressive summary of the miracles which were being wrought; and the story concludes with these appropriate words: "And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word by the signs that followed."

The ministry of Christ, as recorded by Mark, is also one of mighty words. Attention is so properly and commonly drawn to the important place assigned in this Gospel to deeds of power that at times due stress is not laid upon the prominence given to the teaching and preaching of our Lord. No other Gospel makes such frequent mention of his teaching, or so emphasizes its authority, originality, and attractiveness. Even the miracles appear to be acted parables, and were not merely marks of compassion but were vehicles for conveying divine truth.

Jesus begins his ministry by preaching. The first surprise is occasioned by his tone of authority as he speaks in the synagogue. As he opens his work in Galilee he is saying, "Let us go elsewhere into the next towns, that I may preach there also, for to this end came I forth." Because of his teaching, such multitudes gather about him by the seaside that he is compelled to enter into a boat as he addresses them. He then begins to teach in parables, and while only four of these are recorded, three relate to preaching. The fourth, seventh, ninth, tenth, twelfth, and thirteenth chapters are comprised of almost continuous discourses, and together these form one third of the entire Gospel. Jesus did appear the Doer of marvelous works, but also as the Teacher of divine truths. His works make men ready for his words. Together they fill the hours of his busy days. His own mission seems to be like that of his apostles, whom he sent forth "to preach, and to have authority to cast out demons."

The ministry of Christ, as presented by Mark, is supremely one of redeeming love and saving grace. This redemption Christ purchased by his own blood. Those who believe in him are saved. It is this feature of the ministry which makes the story a "Gospel." This term could be applied to

no narrative of miracles and sermons, however graphic and true. The Gospel is the "good news" of a salvation made possible by the life and death and resurrection of our Lord. Thus Mark has not attempted to write a "life of Christ." Otherwise he would not have passed in silence the birth and youth and early manhood, or have selected only a few incidents from the three years of public service, centering our thoughts on the events of a single week. This book is not a biography. Much less is it an "informal memoir." It is a short history of redemption. It is a joyful announcement of the salvation which has been secured by Christ. It is a brief story of his atoning work. Thus in its first scene the sinless Son of God, by submitting to a "baptism of repentance unto remission of sins," is identifying himself with sinners whom he has come to save. His miracles show his supremacy over the forces of evil. He declares that he has power to forgive sins. At the climax of his ministry he declares the cross to be the divine provision for salvation. On the night of his betrayal he states that his blood is "poured out for many." As he breathes out his life, the veil of the Temple is "rent in two from the top to the bottom," a symbol of the finished work of atonement by which man is given access to God.

The condition of salvation as set forth by Mark is repentance and faith. Confession is to be made by baptism. The new life is to be expressed in service. In fact, among the followers of Christ, service is to be the sign and measure of greatness--"whosoever would become great" among them should be their servant, and whosoever would be first should be the slave of all.

Such, in part, is the picture which Mark draws of the kingly Servant, who is at once the "strong Son of God" and "immortal Love," whose servants must follow in his steps,

"And trust in his redeeming blood  
And try his works to do."

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