

Bible Book of the Month: Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

Background:

The writer of this Gospel is generally assumed to be Mark, the companion to both Peter and Paul. It was written during the 60s C.E. Evidence in the gospel suggests that it was written to Christians in the Roman Empire before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E.

Story Content:

Mark himself called his book "Gospel". He compiled and recorded the stories that were being told about Jesus, providing a faithful understanding about Jesus Christ, the Son of God, relative to the people's situation.

Mark's gospel is structured around three key scenes: Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion. In each scene Jesus is declared the Son of God, but only in the last scene at the crucifixion with the confession of the centurion under the cross is Jesus fully revealed as the crucified Messiah.

While the story begins in the wilderness around the river Jordan, most of Jesus' ministry occurs in the northern region of Galilee. The word "immediately" indicates the fast pace of the narrative. Occasionally Jesus ventures into Gentile territory to the east and north. In the far north, at Caesarea Philippi Peter confesses Jesus to be the Messiah. This high point in the Gospel is matched by Jesus' three predictions regarding his death and resurrection. By 10:1 Jesus is back in the Judean wilderness, east of the Jordan River, and in 11:1 he is approaching Jerusalem. Chapters 1-10 appear to reflect on up to three years of Jesus' ministry, while chapters 11-16 record the events of a single week in a slower pace but intensified action. The entire story leads to the cross, but also back from the cross into mission, as the disciples are directed to return to Galilee where they will again see Jesus.

Message:

The book is the only one in the Bible clearly labeled 'Gospel', (the good news in 1:1). It gives us one way to understand the meaning of the term, as the story about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But the Gospel is not meant just to give information about Jesus, it also to create and strengthen faith in him, and develop true discipleship of Jesus. At the time of the writing Christians needed to define their identity in connection to their Jewish heritage. They also experienced challenges and persecutions from the prevailing Greco-Roman culture. The Christians were struggling with the same question we face today: "If Jesus did such wonderful things and has overcome death in his resurrection, why can things often be so bad for us today?"

It is tempting to respond to this question by focusing on the glorious aspects of Jesus' ministry, of his authority, his miracles, and the transfiguration. But Mark consistently focuses us on the cross. Jesus is indeed the Son of God, but this is not truly realized except in his serving, suffering and death. Jesus is indeed the hoped-for Messiah, but we only fully realize *how* he is making God's kingdom present when we experience him as the crucified Messiah.

The Gospel is good news in that the story of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection give shape and meaning for the faith and life of Mark's first readers as well as for us. As faithful disciples of Jesus, it is precisely in being last, in serving, even in dying for Christ's sake, that we discover the true meaning of life.
