

A STUDY THROUGH THE GOSPELS

MARK

Introduction to the Gospel of Mark

LESSON ONE

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CLEANED-UP CLASS TRANSCRIPT

01

What Events Have Changed the World?

Good morning. We're starting a new study today that will take us through the Gospel of Mark — somehow you get one of the shorter books in the New Testament and spend longer on it than you'd expect. That's just how it works sometimes. Mark is an interesting Gospel in a lot of ways, as you're going to find out today.

To get started, I want you to think about something you may never have thought about before — though maybe you should have. In your lifetime, what events have changed the world?

Someone said the invention of computers. That changed the world — whether for good or bad is a different story. When you listen to technologists, they'll tell you it's the best thing in the world. Yeah, until it doesn't work, or it messes up, or you have another problem. Computers are a big deal like that. The internet changed things too. Norman offered the splitting of the atom. And mapping the human genome unlocks a lot of things, including how you cure diseases — there are diseases on the cusp of being eradicated right now because of it. Someone else said the moon landing.

McDonald's changed the world too — actually, that's more true than you'd think. I guarantee it. In my own family, we were talking about this on the way to church, because we're supposed to take our granddaughter to lunch today. Our grandson isn't coming, thank goodness, because if you ask him where he wants to eat, he says McDonald's every time. My wife asked him why he always picks McDonald's, and he said, "It's the same thing every time — no decision-making required." So that's true too.

Now, I want you to notice something about these events. There's always a defining event for each generation. My father could tell you where he was when Pearl Harbor was attacked. I can tell you where I was when I heard about the Kennedy assassination. And we're coming up on the twenty-fifth anniversary of 9/11, which defines a whole generation as well.

Notice something else: the big events of history are usually explosive. They're splashed all over the newspapers and screens. My mother, when I was a child, built a whole scrapbook of newspapers about the Kennedy assassination — I still haven't let it go, even though you can get the same information at the touch of your fingers now. But there was something to the idea that this needed to be remembered. This was huge. Monumental. Life-changing. Life-altering.

But here's my second question: how would you know something was life-changing if it happened quietly? You'd have to start sensing it, wouldn't you?

The polio vaccine wasn't one of the “big” ideas people usually name, but it did change the world. I still have a scar on my shoulder from it; my kids don't. I've had friends throughout my life who had polio, and I know the devastation it caused. I'm grateful we've largely gotten rid of it. But we don't always recognize what's life-changing while it's happening — it's usually only afterward that you see it.

That's exactly the story of the Gospel of Mark, which we're going to look at over the next fifteen weeks or so. It tells the story of something that changed the world and changed destinies for eternity — but it happened so quietly you might have missed it. If you took a timeline of everything going on in the world at that time, Christianity wouldn't have even registered as a blip on it.

It happened so quietly you might have missed it.

02 The Shape of Mark's Gospel

I thought I'd show you one of the better outlines I've seen of Mark, in chart form — I like things in a picture better. The story of Mark has an interesting structure. Mark spends eight chapters covering three years, but then the apex of the book, the hinge everything turns around, is in chapter eight. And in chapter eight, the question is, “Who do you say that I am?” That's the question.

Think of a door: it opens against its hinge and closes against it at the same time. Mark has three years covered in the first seven-plus chapters, and then from about seven-plus chapters on, there's only one week left. The first seven and a half chapters cover three years. The last seven and a half chapters cover seven days. When you realize that about Mark, you start to see what an amazing structure it is. In the first part, he's clarifying Jesus' identity — performing miracles, teaching, mostly staying in Galilee. He doesn't go much outside Galilee in these chapters. But then suddenly, in the next part, there's a definiteness about who Jesus is, opposition rises, and he's primarily in Judea and Jerusalem. The whole scene changes.

The big word in Mark is the word immediately. Now, with that bit of esoteric knowledge about the structure of Mark — the kind of thing you'd get in a second-year New Testament class in college — let's move on.

03

What Does It Mean to “Follow” Jesus?

Following has an interesting meaning today. I don’t know if you’ve ever thought about that. We don’t use that word the same way all the time. For instance, if you’re in the foyer and someone’s looking for the restroom, you can say, “Follow me, I’ll show you where it is” — you give them directions. That’s one way. Another way — because we live in a world of social media — is following people online. All that means is we’re keeping in touch in some loose way, trying to figure out what’s going on in their life. It’s actually pretty passive. You can follow someone and never read anything about them again.

I’ve known people who try to impress others by saying, “I have 5,000 followers.” My question is always, “How many of those people have you ever met?” “Two.” You don’t have much of a following — that’s the problem. We’ve messed up the language.

04

Who Was Mark?

So when you get to Mark, we try to apply language we’ve always used for other things, and it doesn’t quite fit. That’s what this whole class is about — what does this really mean? I think we need to figure out where we’re standing right now. It’s like going to the mall, not knowing where you are, and finding the map that says, “You are here.” This is a “you are here” class. We’re going to talk about who this man Mark was and what kind of Gospel he wrote, because you have to understand that to understand the rest of it.

We’ve actually met Mark before, in our last study on the life of Paul. He’s an interesting fellow — the son of a fairly well-to-do woman, and her house was used as a meeting place. That’s true in Acts, and it appears that the house where the Last Supper took place was the very house Mark grew up in. Mark drops in a couple of small details we’ll come to later — one about that house, and another about something that happens in the middle of the night when Jesus is captured, found nowhere else in the Gospels. Apparently Mark, as a boy, had been watching these things without fully understanding them.

In the book of Acts, Mark goes on the first missionary journey with Paul and his uncle Barnabas. You know the story: when they reach Perga, Mark slips off back home, and Paul doesn’t want to take him on the next journey. Barnabas takes Mark along on his own trip instead, and we don’t know much about what happened to them after that. But we do know

that, in the end, Mark becomes useful to Paul again. I always like that story — Mark, like others in the New Testament, goes from being useless to useful. That's the spiritual autobiography of a lot of people: they were no account, and now they've got something to show for it.

Then there's a gap, and suddenly you find him in 1 Peter chapter 5, where it says, "She who is in Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, as does my son Mark." If you think "Babylon" there means Babylon itself, remember that Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied it would be leveled and never occupied again — and in fact it wasn't rebuilt or known much about in the Western world until the twentieth century, when it was reconstructed a little as part of modern-day Iraq. So this isn't a physical place; it's a metaphor. When Revelation talks about Rome, it calls it Babylon. Peter and Mark were in Rome — Peter preaching, Mark right there with him.

Mark had a lot of influences on his life, and tradition fills in more of the story. We hate to rely too heavily on tradition, but you have to, because otherwise you don't have any other information. It's like when you want to know what's going on and you ask somebody — they may not be perfectly accurate, but at least you learn something. Tradition says Mark went on to Alexandria, Egypt, and planted a church there. Alexandria was a big, important city, and that would have been a good place for him — if that's indeed where he went.

05

Mark, Peter, and the Reliability of the Gospel

Mark takes his Gospel from Peter's preaching. There's a man named Papias you may not know — church fathers are pretty dry reading, but Papias lived at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second. He was close to the events, and anything close to the events described in Scripture becomes much more reliable. It's the same as if my father saw something and told me about it — it loses a little in translation, but Papias was close to the source.

What Papias says is this: Mark, who was Peter's interpreter, wrote down accurately — though not in order — all that he remembered of what Christ said and did. Mark himself wasn't a hearer of the Lord or a follower of His; he was too young, and he didn't experience it firsthand. But he followed Peter, and Peter adapted his teaching to practical needs without any attempt to lay out the Lord's words systematically. In other words, Peter didn't do history — Peter did sermons. Sermons aren't historical. You can put a sermon together all kinds of ways; you can take it apart and come up with a dozen different structures to make a point. That's what Peter was doing, and Papias says Mark wasn't wrong to write it down this way from memory, because his one concern was neither to omit nor to falsify anything he had heard.

That means Mark is a reflection of the preaching of Peter, an eyewitness — and that matters, because Mark is part of the synoptic Gospels, along with Matthew and Luke. They're called "synoptic" because the word means "to see together" — they portray roughly the same terrain, but with real differences. Luke has a Sermon on the Plain; Matthew has a Sermon on the Mount; Mark has none of that.

This is just my own thinking — others don't hold to it, and I let them be wrong if they like — but I believe Mark was the first Gospel written. Usually, when someone writes about a subject someone else has already covered, they add a little based on what they've seen and heard. Mark is stripped down, and that's part of why I think he came first. I think Papias would agree with me. But who cares — he's dead anyhow.

06

Why Mark Wrote the Way He Did

Mark was probably written to a Roman audience — people who'd had it up to their gills with Roman gods who couldn't do anything, didn't care about them, and didn't respond to anything. They wanted something worth living for, and they weren't getting it from their gods. Mark is very realistic; it tells exactly what took place. Jesus is portrayed as both human and divine — something we still can't fully wrap our minds around. Even by the end of the first century, people were trying to say Jesus was divine but seemed like a man, or a man who seemed like God. They couldn't figure it out either. It's an eternal mystery: how can God come down to earth in human flesh and still be God?

Mark has this eyewitness quality — Peter didn't see everything himself, but Mark reports it the way Peter would have told it. For instance, Mark uses some Aramaic phrases. I've read writers who like to quote something in Latin or French to show off, and if you're lucky they bother to translate it for you.

But with Mark, it's about the reality, the eyewitness reality — he writes as though it's happening right now. There's a sense of motion; you're in the middle of things, and it's moving around you. It's not "this happened," it's "this is happening." That's a different idea, and the big word in Mark is immediately. He uses it more than forty times. The rest of the New Testament — the other twenty-six books combined — uses it together less than a dozen times. That's a big deal. Why? "Immediately" can be temporal — right now — but it also carries emotional urgency. There's a difference between asking, "Can you do this ASAP?" and shouting "Now!" The second one gets you off dead center. There's a sense of urgency running through Mark's Gospel, and we're going to see it even in today's lesson.

07

The Beginning of the Good News

Mark talks about “the beginning of the good news.” Beginnings are interesting — Mark jumps right into it. There’s no introduction, no genealogy, no “in the days of.” There’s just: the beginning of the gospel, the good news. And “good news” wasn’t originally a churchy word — we turned it into one. We only use “gospel” in church; you never hear it anywhere else, unless somebody’s showing off. But in Mark’s time it was a very secular word. When a new emperor came to reign, heralds went out through the land and announced, “There is good news. There is the beginning of a new era.” There’s a sense of a beginning, a change of allegiance, and that idea runs through everything here.

Someone once compared Matthew to a symphony and Luke to a novel, and said that if you turned Mark into something, you’d make him a telegram — short, sweet, urgent. “Good news has arrived. Stop. Read immediately. Stop.” That’s how he starts, with that kind of urgency.

But why the urgency? You have to look at the background of history at this point. For four hundred years, there had been no revelation from God. Tradition and interpretation had replaced revelation: “This is what we think is true. This is what we expect to be true. This is what our fathers said was true.” But where was God’s voice in all this? There was nothing there. And suddenly, in Mark, there’s this bursting into the moment — God is present again in a way He hadn’t been for centuries.

There’s a pattern you can trace through the whole Bible. God creates the heavens and the earth in Genesis 1 and 2, followed by the creation of man. Man sins, and there’s a long slide toward the flood as things get progressively worse. After the flood, there’s a re-creation — God tells Noah, “Go forth and multiply,” echoing the creation language back in Genesis 2. But then there’s another long slide down to the captivity in Babylon. The people return in the restoration of 536 BC, and yet not much seems to happen — there’s a lethargy, an apathy, as if nothing’s going to change. So something has to be re-created again, and that’s what the gospel does. God’s work happens because God intervenes after man’s decline, and it happens at the right time. “The time has come” — that’s Mark 1:15, part of today’s lesson. It means “to be fulfilled,” and there’s a lot wrapped up in that phrase.

08 God's Timing

There are right times and wrong times, aren't there? I think I've told you this story before, but since I'm old and decrepit, I get to repeat myself — that's the joy of being old.

When my grandson was on the way, my daughter came home and said his due date was around June 15. On that same day we had a dentist appointment, and my wife asked, "Do you think we ought to cancel it?" I said no. She asked why not — the baby was going to be here that day. I said, "Because I know one thing for sure: babies never come on schedule." And sure enough, he was born three weeks early, and we kept our dentist appointment. Babies come when the time is right. Leaves fall when the time is right. God's timing is different — God does things at the right time, in the right way, and Mark shows us this was the right time. The moment was right.

So it says, "This is the good news about Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God." The translators kind of obscure something there with the word "about." The actual word in the Greek is simply "of." The trouble with "of" is that you have to interpret it. I'm not kidding — there are scholars today who will write entire volumes on the meaning of a single preposition. If you're a graduate student, you're stuck reading them, and your only real conclusion is that they're nuts. But here's why it matters: "of" can mean two things. It can mean content — this is the gospel which is about Jesus Christ. Or it can mean origin — this is the gospel which came from Jesus Christ. I think the double meaning is intentional. I prefer to leave things uninterpreted when they're meant to be left that way, because Jesus is both the author and the subject of the gospel. Both, no matter what.

09 The Messenger Who Prepares the Way

Right away, there's this interjection of Scripture: "As was written in Isaiah the prophet" — though the quotation actually draws from more than one place. It speaks of a messenger who will come ahead, "the voice of one calling in the wilderness." When you have a big event coming, someone has to be the advance party. Say the president is coming to Dallas next week — part of what happens is certain roads get closed, certain hotels get chosen, certain caterers get lined up. You don't ask the president what he wants for lunch; he's already got a plan. But if you're stuck on I-35 when that motorcade comes through, good luck getting home — they'll close the freeway, because they know the time is coming.

So the message is: “I’ve got an advance man coming.” Isaiah says there’s going to be one calling in the wilderness, “prepare the way of the Lord,” and Malachi says, “I’m going to send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me.” There has to be preparation. People have to be ready for what this message is going to be like, and someone has to start it so they’ll recognize it when it comes.

Then Mark does something interesting in chapter 1, verse 4: John the Baptist appears in the wilderness. He just appears. There’s no birth story here — no Zechariah and Elizabeth. He simply appears, out in the wilderness.

10

Why Was John So Strange?

John is an interesting fellow. It says he wore clothing made of camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and that he ate locusts and wild honey. Here’s a question I had to wrestle with this week: why was he so strange? Maybe it was to get attention. There’s an old saying that if you really want to be a great preacher, set yourself on fire, because people will come to watch you burn. I understand that metaphorically, but I get the idea.

There may even be a deliberate echo of Elijah here — Scripture describes Elijah in almost the same way, leather belt included. That’s probably not a coincidence.

John wasn’t just a crazy guy out in the desert with no one to help him dress properly, though I suppose there’s some of that too. But here’s the description: bugs and honey. The other day — I wish I remembered which store it was — my wife was checking out, and I was standing by what’s usually the candy counter, not because I was hungry but because I was bored.

Something caught my eye: a package of edible crickets. I’ve been thinking about it all week — I wish I could find that place again so I could bring some for all of you. High-grade protein, and you can get it right off your kitchen floor! We don’t eat stuff like that. But bugs and honey — that’s all John ate. Want the ultimate diet? There it is. Eat bugs and honey; you’ll never have a weight problem again. You won’t have a friend problem either.

He wore scratchy clothes nobody else wore, out in the middle of the Judean wilderness, where it’s hot and barren and nobody goes. He wasn’t in Jerusalem or Judea like all the other rabbis — he was different. Why so strange? Here’s my answer: the man and the message were the same. The messenger can’t get out of the way of the message — he’ll either mess it up or enhance it, one or the other. And John’s message was going to be so different that it was going to be startling.

The same was true of Jesus — he didn't come with wealth or status either. Everything about him was different too, and it took people off guard. This is what's happening: it's a shock to the system. This isn't what people had seen before.

The man and the message were the same.

11

A Baptism of Repentance

He preaches repentance — a baptism of repentance. This bothers us sometimes, because we don't always know what that really means. We know about baptism, but ours is for the forgiveness of sins — Peter says in Acts 2:38, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of your sins.” So were the people John baptized having their sins forgiven right then? The obvious answer is no — because if they were, the story would just end there, and it doesn't. There's something more to it. Repentance literally means a change of mind — really, a change of allegiance. It's about who I'm going to serve and what direction my life is going to take. I looked that up this week: I can't stay what I am now and also be this.

The idea of baptism for repentance wasn't strange to the Jews — though how it was going to be applied here was different. This is the change of allegiance we're talking about, and that's what this baptism of repentance means. The Jews knew that Gentiles went through a three-stage process to convert to Judaism — Jews were simply born into it, but a Gentile had three steps. First, he had to be circumcised (that's the big issue in Acts 15 — how are the Gentiles going to come into the church?). Then he had to offer sacrifices. And last, he had to be baptized, to convert and become Jewish. Jews themselves didn't practice baptism for that reason. But here's the problem: when John preached this, he said, in effect, “I don't care if you were born a Jew — everybody's going to do this, because everybody's in the same boat when it comes to the kingdom of God.” Nobody gets grandfathered in. Everybody has to repent. Everybody has to change, and everybody has to show that the change has taken place.

John's baptism itself was really just a symbol — it did very little except serve as an expression of an inward desire. But his message was clear: after him, someone was coming who would do the baptizing, and it would have power behind it. “I've got preaching behind me; he's got power behind him.” So if you had to sum up John's baptism, it was a plea for the life everyone wanted but had no way of obtaining. They wanted a new life but had no way of actually getting it. It was the plea that says, “I want the new life,” and the recognition that there was still One to come who could give it.

12

Jesus' Baptism and the Torn-Open Heavens

Then, suddenly, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan River. Need wasn't the issue in this verse — it wasn't that Jesus needed to be baptized. It says that as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens being torn open. Mark uses that term only twice in his Gospel — once here, and it's violent; tearing something is violent. The other time is at the crucifixion, when the temple curtain is torn. Same word, both times. There's a tearing open of heaven, and a tearing open of the Jewish system, and both happen in the Gospel of Mark. There's this violent change taking place. The Spirit descends like a dove, and there's a voice from heaven, and the question everyone will have to answer is: who is this man? God says, "I'm going to tell you who it is. This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased." There's this sense that heaven has put its stamp of approval on him. This baptism wasn't for Jesus' benefit — it was for the benefit of everyone else, so they'd know what was going on with this stranger who had come out of the desert. He's not like anyone else. He's different.

This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.

MARK 1:11

13

Driven Into the Wilderness

Then it says — and it's often read as the Spirit "sending him out," but that's not quite what it says. It says the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness. It didn't gently ask him. It didn't take him by the hand and say, "Let's take a weekend trip — let's go to Palm Springs for the summer." That's not what this says. All at once, immediately, he was driven out to a place where he was going to suffer. What's interesting about Mark is that he captures in one sentence what takes Matthew a full chapter — nothing more than: Jesus in the desert with the wild animals and the devil. Sometimes God drives us into places we wouldn't choose to go, for the benefit we need — and that was true for Jesus too.

Suddenly John is put in prison. You can talk about the timeline all you want, but for Mark, this is how he hooks us: John was put in prison, and Jesus is about to go do exactly what John did. That's a risky venture — it's either risk or resolve, I don't know which. If John got thrown in prison for doing what he was doing, and you're about to go do the same thing, does that make

sense? Why do it, then? “Because the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news.” Repent and believe — both words matter here. Repentance is about changing allegiance, as we said. Believing is about putting your whole trust in this good news.

Some people can’t hold those two things together. Some believe in repentance without grace, and what they end up with is legalism pinned to a Bible verse — it’s all about you doing the changing, you doing the changing. Others have grace without any repentance — God just accepts you as you are. That’s sentimental Christianity at best. What Jesus does here is put both change and the ability to be changed in the very same passage.

Repent, and believe the good news.

MARK 1:15

14

The Calling of the First Disciples

All of a sudden, he’s walking beside the Sea of Galilee, and there are these four guys — Peter, Andrew, James, and John — all part of a fishing venture. James and John’s father, Zebedee, owns the fishing company; he’s got his own fleet of boats. They go out and do that, day after day. Jesus comes along and blows up everything they’d assumed about their lives — that they’d be fishermen the rest of their days, comfortable, taken care of. Instead, Jesus says, “Come, follow me. I’ll make you fishers of men.” Do you do that? Are you that impetuous?

Think about it this way: somebody calls you, or nowadays sends you a text, saying, “Someone has tried to use your credit card to buy a computer somewhere you’ve never been. Call us right now.” I get those regularly. Do you call them? Why not? It’s a scam, right — you know it’s a scam. So why is this not a scam? A man walks up and says, “Come follow me. I’ll take you places you’ve never been, let you do things you’ve never done.” You’d think, “Not me.” But they went. There’s more to it than what’s written here, I’m sure. But it’s remarkable, the quick pace at which Mark presents their decision to follow — the urgency of it, matched by the urgency of the moment. That tells you a lot about what following Jesus is all about, right as the Gospel of Mark opens. When you encounter the good news, it often shows up quiet and uninviting. It was the right time. John showed up in the desert; Jesus showed up at the river. The gospel begins to appear.

15

Three Things the Good News Does

No one ever said, a year before it started, “Be aware — something great is about to happen.” It’s only the sermon that says, “Repent, repent.” It’s quiet, unimpressive, but life-changing. It comes in a quiet, uninvited way. It does in our lives too, most of the time — bombastic usually doesn’t work.

Second, the good news will rearrange your life. Think about all the lives that got rearranged in this passage. All those people who came to John, and John told them, “You need to change your allegiance, change your direction, change your life.” “I didn’t come out here for that.” “Why did you come out here, then — to see a show? There is no show. The only show is going to happen in your life.” Look at these four fishermen — suddenly their lives come completely unraveled, headed places they’d never thought about going. One of them will be executed early. Another will live a long life but still be crucified — upside down. Another will die in obscurity. And one will grow a long gray beard and die almost as a new century is being marked. They don’t know what’s going to happen. Neither do you, when you make your decision about Jesus.

Third, the good news forces you to let go of what you want to hold on to. I think that’s one of the big problems people have when they consider becoming Christians — they want to hold on to something familiar, and those who take it seriously understand that they can’t. I remember sitting with a woman once — I’d been studying with her, and we got to the point of talking about her response, and she started getting resistant. I said, “I get the idea that you’d like to, but you don’t, at the same time. What’s going on?” She said, “Well, my family is Catholic, and if I do this, I can’t be part of the family holiday traditions.” I said, “Why not?” “Well, I just wouldn’t feel good about it.” “So you couldn’t go to Christmas dinner with them?” “I don’t know.” She eventually worked it out over the years and was baptized. But one of the interesting things about that was, she already understood the real issue: if she was going to become a Christian, she had to let go of what she wanted to hold on to. That’s one of the things happening throughout the Gospel of Mark — people having to either hold on to what they know, or let go of what they don’t yet know. That’s the decision the gospel puts in front of us.

Next week we’ll continue in chapters one and two and talk about forgiveness. So we’ll see you then.

The good news forces you to let go of what you want to hold on to.

