

Study 18: The Gospel of the Son of God

The Written Gospel.

“Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature,” Jesus commanded His disciples [Mk 16:15]. So far we’ve looked at how the “good news of salvation” was first spread throughout the ancient world in obedience to Jesus’ command. We’ve also become familiar with the basic outline of the preached gospel [Study Guide #17]. Now we will begin our study of the written gospel.

Although the gospel writers remain faithful to the content of early gospel preaching, they also exercise a degree of freedom in how they order and present the facts. Each of the four Gospels is written from a definite point of view, and our task in this study is to examine how Mark approaches the good news.

Mark’s Gospel.

Early Christian tradition tells us that Mark was a disciple of the Apostle Peter, and so in his Gospel we encounter a blending of the traditional preaching of the Apostle Peter with material gathered from other sources. These sources include not only the testimony of various individual witnesses, but also the testimony provided by the life and worship of the living Church. Some scholars have attempted to reconstruct these sources of the written Gospel, but I personally believe they have been largely unsuccessful in this effort. It’s important for us to realize that every author impresses on his work a viewpoint, a form that reflects how he approaches the writing of the Gospel. And so, while it is certainly true that Mark’s Gospel is a faithful account of the life and teaching of Jesus Christ attested by the witnesses of the first-generation Church, it also possesses a unique perspective which makes it different from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

Mark, the Man.

John Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and associated with him in spreading the message of Christianity [Col 4:10]. He traveled with St. Paul on his first missionary journey [Acts 12:25 ff], but the two missionaries had a falling out over Mark’s unwillingness to accompany Paul into Pamphylia. They were later reconciled and Mark was great comfort to Paul during his imprisonment at Rome [Acts 16:36-39 and Philem 1:24].

Mark apparently had a long and intimate association with St. Peter. It was to the home of Mark’s mother that Peter came after his miraculous escape from Herod’s prison in Jerusalem, and it seems that Mark acted as Peter’s secretary, interpreter, and assistant during the Apostle’s ministry. At the close of his first letter, Peter speaks of Mark as “my son” [1 Pet 5:13].

Date of Composition.

Many scholars, although not all, believe that the *Gospel of Mark* is the earliest of the four Gospels, at least in the form we have them today. Other scholars believe that an earlier form of the *Gospel of Matthew*, written in Aramaic, was actually the earliest, although it is no longer extant. They believe that the *Gospel of Matthew* we possess today is a Greek rendition of Matthew’s original Aramaic Gospel. Some scholars believe that the translator of *Matthew* used St. Mark’s Gospel as in aid in preparing his Greek version. Many Scriptural scholars believe that the Gospel of Mark was composed in Rome sometime after the year 53 A.D. and before 70 A.D., although other scholars, of course, disagree. Two things, however, are certain: (1) the scholars, the experts, always disagree; and (2) their disagreements matter little to us who come to the Gospel to receive spiritual refreshment from Jesus Christ, the Word of God.

Mark’s Method.

The differences between Mark’s Gospel and the other Gospels show us the uniqueness of Mark’s approach. By way of introduction, he touches only briefly on the ministry of John the Baptist, Christ’s Baptism, and the time in the desert. He then devotes almost half of his entire Gospel to Jesus’ Galilean ministry, and stresses both the enthusiasm of the people and the growing opposition of the Jewish authorities. The training and preparation of the Apostles also receives a major share of Mark’s attention

and culminates in the Transfiguration event on Mount Tabor. And finally, in common with the other Gospel writers, Mark recounts the events of Jesus' passion and death.

In his Gospel, Mark also stresses the unwillingness of the Apostles to accept the idea of a Messiah who must undergo suffering, an attitude best shown by Christ's rebuke of Peter: *"Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."*

Mark also doesn't waste any time declaring Jesus' divinity. Indeed, he begins his Gospel with the words: *"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Mark goes on answer the question, "Who is this man?" by preserving those events in Jesus' life that related specifically to His mysterious origin and power. The following examples highlight this:

Event	Scripture	Verse
Jesus' Baptism	And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."	Mk 1:11
Jesus' Transfiguration	Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him."	Mk 9:7
Power to forgive sin	"But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority to forgive sins on earth..."	Mk 2:10
Lord of the Sabbath	"The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. That is why the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath."	Mk 2:27-28
Lord of Nature	They were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this whom even wind and sea obey?"	Mk 4:41
Power of Demons	Jesus, on seeing a crowd rapidly gathering, rebuked the unclean spirit and said to it, "Mute and deaf spirit, I command you: come out of him and never enter him again!"	Mk 9:25

Mark also highlights the humanity of Jesus Christ by recording the following events which focus on His humility and suffering:

Event	Scripture	Verse
Jesus' rejection by those who knew Him	Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his native place and among his own kin and in his own house." So he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them.	Mk 6:4-5
Jesus' rejection by religious leaders	So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death.	Mk 14:1
The people's lack of understanding	"...they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven."	Mk 4:12
His relatives' lack of understanding	He came home. Again (the) crowd gathered, making it impossible for them even to eat. When his relatives heard of this they set out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."	Mk 3:20-21
His disciples' lack of understanding	They answered him, "Grant that in your glory we may sit one at your right and the other at your left." Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"	Mk 10:37-38

I recall once hearing Mark's Gospel described as "a Passion story with a long introduction." That's actually a fairly accurate description. Throughout Mark, a Gospel that seems to be written in the context of a crisis, the focus is always on the Cross. This, of course, only lends credibility to the idea that it could very well have been written for Christian community in Rome, probably sometime before the year 70 A.D. This would have been after the first persecution of Christians under the Emperor Nero. Nero, his evil ways, and his horribly cruel persecution had a tremendous impact on the budding Christian community of Rome. Indeed, the persecution was so severe that it resulted in the public failure of many Christians.

It's quite possible, then, that Mark was writing to address these failures of discipleship at a time when morale had reached a definite low point. This is brought out in the parable of the *sower* introduced in Mk 4. Note especially the words Jesus uses to explain the meaning of the seed that falls on rocky ground: "*And these are the ones sown on rocky ground who, when they hear the word, receive it at once with joy. But they have no root; they last only for a time. Then when tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away*" [Mk 4:16-17]. What we see in Mark's Gospel is a confrontation with raw power, a confrontation that can be won only by staying true to Our Lord.

Mark's selection of content, his strict economy of words (Mark's Gospel is by far the shortest), and the almost breathless movement of the story from one scene to the next gives his Gospel a sense of real urgency. It's as if Mark wants to ensure we are aware of the high stakes involved.

As I mentioned above, Mark begins his Gospel with a stark statement of the truth about Jesus Christ: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" At the same time his opening words echo the first words of Genesis, making clear the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New. Those opening words of Mark, in effect, begin the Church's proclamation to the world about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. [See Phil 4:15 for an appreciation of this fact.]

Now open your Bible. In our study of Mark's Gospel, we will read the entire Gospel, Mark 1-16. As you read, take a pencil and write in the margin of your Bible:

- ✠ "Introduction" – next to Mk 1:1-13
- ✠ "Part One: The Messianic Mystery" – next to Mk 1:14 - 8:30
- ✠ "Part Two: The Mysterious Son of Man" – next to Mk 8:31 – 16:20

Among other things, Mark's Gospel is a study in personality, a delving into the mysterious nature of Jesus of Nazareth. Mark seems to divide the question -- *Who is this man?* -- into two questions: (1) *What kind of Messiah does He claim to be?* and (2) *Is He something more than a mere human Messiah?* The first question forms the foundation of chapters one through eight, while the second half of the Gospel, chapters nine through sixteen, seeks to answer the second question.

Behind the Words. Now let's look at some key concepts and passages in Mark's Gospel.

✠ **Discipleship in Mark's Gospel.** As we read Mark's Gospel, one of the themes that becomes apparent is the idea of *discipleship*.

In the first eight chapters the disciples all possess what seems to us, who are blessed with hindsight, to be a remarkable lack of understanding. They really don't appear to have a clue about who this Jesus really is or the nature of His mission. An incident that best depicts this lack of understanding is described in Mk 8:14-21.

Then, in chapters eight through ten, the disciples seem to move from no understanding to different forms of misunderstanding. See, for example, Peter's rebuke of Jesus in Mk 8:31-33. The disciples' misunderstanding is also evident in their silence, as related in Mk 9:33-37. And finally, in Mk 10:32, we see Jesus walking "ahead of them." The disciples were afraid because

the still misunderstood the nature of Jesus' mission and what He and they would soon face in Jerusalem.

All of this, of course, points to one of the key truths regarding God's Revelation, that *the mystery of Christ transcends all human understanding*.

But the journey of Jesus' disciples is still incomplete. Mark, after depicting their lack of understanding and their misunderstanding, describes their failure during the time of supreme crisis. As Jesus confronts His passion and death, the disciples betray Him, desert Him, and abandon Him. Peter, their leader, even denies the Lord and is then consumed with guilt. Afterwards, still overcome by fear, the disciples huddle together behind locked doors in the upper room, hiding from the authorities.

And so, through Mark we come to learn that the journey of the disciple does not preclude failures and difficulties along the way. It is only after Jesus' Resurrection and the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they can finally do as Jesus asks them: "*But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs*" [Mk 16:20].

Interestingly, in Mark's Gospel the most authentic signs of true discipleship come not from those Jesus chose as His disciples, but from the least expected sources. The Syrophoenician woman, a Greek and Gentile, who begs Jesus to drive the demon from her daughter is rewarded for her faith [Mk 7:24-30]. Bartimaeus, the blind man Jesus encounters in Jericho, is likewise cured and saved because his faith [Mk 10:46-52]. Another unlikely disciple is the scribe who questions Jesus about the Law and agrees publicly with Jesus. "You are not far from the kingdom of God," Jesus tells him [Mk 12:28-34]. Other examples abound: the widow and her mite (actually two coins) [Mk 12:41-44]; the woman who anoints Jesus in Bethany [Mk 14:3-9] who receives the promise by Jesus that "*wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.*"

† **Geography and Discipleship in Mark.** In Mark's Gospel this growth in discipleship also seems to have a geographic element. The story begins where the disciples make their home, in Galilee, in familiar surroundings among family and friends. It is a place where they are most comfortable, but also a place that they must leave if they are to grow as disciples. And then, on the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus instructs them and reveals to them His true identity and mission. Finally, it is in Jerusalem where the cost of discipleship becomes evident. The following outlines this geographic progression of Mark's Gospel as it follows the journey of the disciple:

Galilee: Mk 1:14 – Mk 8. During this period Jesus and His disciples are in Galilee. It is there that Jesus begins His mission: He calls His disciples; He heals the sick; He exorcises demons; He feeds the hungry through His miraculous power. Quite simply, throughout His time in Galilee Jesus plunges into the arena of human pain.

The Journey: Mk 8:22 – 10:52. Jesus and His disciples now begin their journey through Galilee, into Judea, and on to Jerusalem. It is both a real (earthly) journey to Jerusalem and a spiritual journey of discipleship. It is a time when Jesus begins to reveal the nature of His mission to the disciples, a mission that they are at first unable to understand or accept. He predicts His passion and death [Mk 8:31] and begins to instruct the Apostles on the meaning and way of the disciple. It's also the time of the Transfiguration, when Peter, James and John are given a brief glimpse of the reality of Jesus and the power of God [Mk 9:2-10]. Following Jesus along the way we also observe several unusual healings. In Mk 8:22 we encounter the blind man who was not healed immediately. Many commentators regard this gradual cure as symbolic of the gradual enlightenment of the disciples concerning Jesus' true identity as Messiah and Son of God. Compare this healing to that of Bartimaeus, the blind man Jesus meets in Jericho right before His

entry into Jerusalem. Bartimaeus, filled with faith, is healed immediately, setting an example for all the disciples. And indeed, Mark states explicitly that Bartimaeus "...received his sight and followed him on the way" [Mk 10:52].

Jerusalem: Mk 11:1 – 16:8. In this final part of Mark's Gospel, Jesus and His disciples are in Jerusalem. It begins with Jesus' triumphant entry into the city [Mk 11:1-11]. While in Jerusalem He continues his teaching, but must also face increasingly hostile encounters with the religious authorities who are determined to arrest Him [Mk 12:12]. In chapter 13 Jesus gives His eschatological discourse to the disciples, finally describing His return in power and glory. We then follow Jesus from the Last Supper to His arrest, passion, death and burial in the tomb. Throughout it all we observe the weakness and denials of the disciples as they cope with fear and guilt. Finally, the Resurrection is described, although Mark relates no appearances by the risen Jesus. They do, however, receive the promise of a reunion with Jesus in Galilee [Mk 16:7].

† **Jesus as Son of God – Mk 1:1-8.** The title "Son of God" is the first of the titles which St. Mark uses to refer to Jesus. These titles are an important element of Mark's Gospel because the author uses them to bring out the mysterious duality of Jesus, the God-man.

This same title, Son of God, occurs frequently in the Old Testament where it sometimes refers to the angels. See, for example, Job 1:6 – "*One day, when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, Satan also came among them.*"

It also refers to the people of God, Israel: "*So you shall say to Pharaoh: Thus says the LORD: Israel is my son, my first-born*" [Ex 4:22].

It can refer as well to the Messiah-King: "*He shall cry to me, 'You are my father, my God, the Rock that brings me victory!' I myself make him firstborn, Most High over the kings of the earth*" [Ps 89:27-28].

As used in the Old Testament, this title meant someone specially favored by God. When, in St. Mark, the possessed call Jesus, "Son of God" [Mk 3:12; 5:7], we might assume they are using the title in the traditional sense. But it just might be that the spirit world (the demons who encounter Jesus) understands what the disciples don't. And when the title is used by the Father at Jesus' Baptism and during the Transfiguration, its meaning extends far beyond the traditional usage. The Father, after all, is the most reliable source and He claims with all clarity that Jesus is His Son. The Father's use of the title, then, points to something about Jesus that transcends humanity and imparts a divine dimension and participation in divine Being. Here the idea of mere divine favor is surpassed and replaced by a true Sonship and an equality with God the Father. Interestingly, the first person in Mark's Gospel to identify Jesus as the Son of God is a gentile, a Roman centurion [Mk 15:39]. The disciples, however, only come to a full realization of this after the Resurrection.

† **Conflicts with the Pharisees – Mk 2:1-3:6.** In these verses Mark collects five disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees. Some scholars have suggested that in each of these five conflicts with the religious authorities, Mark focuses on a particular and very real concern of the early Church and offers Jesus' teachings on these questions based on statements He made. Their thinking is that these statements of Jesus formed the basis of Mark's "teaching notes" used in his work of instructing the newly baptized Christians of Rome. This might be the case, although no real evidence exists to support such a theory. I prefer to think that Jesus made these statements knowing the problems the Church would face, and that the Holy Spirit inspired Mark to include them in His Gospel. The topics addressed by Jesus in this series of disputes include:

Mk 2:5-10 – Question of forgiveness

Mk 2:15-17 – Eating with tax collectors and sinners

Mk 2:18-20 – On fasting

Mk 2:23-28 – On the Sabbath observance

Mk 3:1-6 – On the Sabbath observance

It is interesting to note how skillfully Mark arranged his material. He presents a steadily mounting note of opposition beginning with the silent criticism of Mk 2:6 and ending with the climactic death-plot of Mk 3:6.

- † **The Parables – Mk 4.** A parable was method of teaching in which comparisons were drawn from everyday life. It was widely used by the rabbis of Jesus' day. Because of its vividness or sometimes its strangeness, it would grip the attention of the hearer while often leaving his mind sufficiently puzzled as to its precise meaning and application. The idea was to tease them into active thought. In Jesus' parables we encounter the expression, "Kingdom of God," which is a translation of a Hebrew word, *Malkuth*. This word contains both the idea of domain or community and the more dynamic concept of God actively exercising kingly rule. This last point is important, for without it we might be tempted to think of the Church as a kind of comfortable club rather than God's instrument for realizing His rule of the hearts of all men and women in every time and place.
- † **A Storm is Stilled – Mk 4:35-41.** Mark's Gospel has always been noted for its vividness of expression. The contrast between *Mark* and the other synoptic Gospels is nowhere as striking as in this passage. Compare this event as described by St. Mark with the parallel passages in *Matthew* [Mt 8:23-27] and *Luke* [Lk 8:22-25]. In Mark's passage you can almost hear Peter recounting this experience to a group of early Christians in Rome.
- † **The Confession of Peter – Mk 8:27-33.** This affirmation by Peter of Jesus Christ as Messiah is the climax of the first half of the *Gospel of Mark*, and indeed marks the major turning point of Mark's Gospel. It is the definitive answer to the first part of Mark's question – *What kind of Messiah does He claim to be?* – and is used by Mark as a point of departure for his exposition of the Messiah's divine nature and His role as suffering Messiah who brings salvation to all of humanity.
- † **The Resurrection of the Body – Mk 12:18-27.** The Sadducees regarded the Torah or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) alone as the revealed word of God. Accordingly, they didn't believe in the possibility of a resurrection of the body, for this revelation only gradually began to appear in the later books of the Old Testament. Though the Old Testament says relatively little on this subject, belief in the resurrection received increasingly greater emphasis in Jewish theology during the centuries immediately preceding Christ.

The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel Tradition.

In Study #17 we looked at the oral gospel, the "good news" as preached by the Apostles and recorded for us by St. Luke in the *Acts of the Apostles*. We noted that certain ideas were more or less common to all apostolic preaching and that these ideas formed the general content of the preached gospel. The four evangelists, though, did not slavishly follow this outline of the preached gospel as they composed their written gospels. Nevertheless, this outline did provide a certain climate of ideas for the evangelists. For this reason it will be useful for us to review briefly the main points of apostolic preaching and see how Mark incorporates them into his work.

1. **The preacher announces the dawn of the messianic age.** The fulfillment of the prophetic message of the Old Testament is the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. The witness of John the Baptist and of the people of Israel is advance to support this claim.

Mk 1:1-13 – This introductory passage elaborates on this theme. Mark's concern is to preserve for us the reactions of the people to Jesus' teaching and miracles, and can be clearly attributable to this influence.

2. *The preacher gives a fairly brief account of the public ministry of Jesus.* We see this also in Mark, who relates key incidents in Jesus' ministry, His death and resurrection, pointing out that the longed-for messianic age has been inaugurated in the events of actual history. The whole of Mark's Gospel may well be taken as a development of this theme.
3. *The preacher proclaims the exaltation of the risen Christ at the right hand of the Father, as the head of the New Israel, the Church.* This element of preaching the gospel is clearly evident in the following passages: *Mk 8:34-38; Mk13:24-37; Mk 14:60-62*
4. *The preacher points to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as the sign of Christ's active presence in the Church and His continuing care for it.* See this addressed in these passages: *Mk 1:7-8; Mk 13:11*
5. *The preacher tells the listeners that Christ will come again to accomplish the final consummation of His rule.* For an example of this element in Mark, see: *Mk 13:24-37*
6. *The preacher calls the listeners to repentance and offers forgiveness in the name of Jesus. The saving acts of God in history always demand a response, calling the people act on what they have heard.* Once again, this element occurs throughout Mark's Gospel. For example, see *Mk 1:14-15*

There is, therefore, a real continuity between the apostolic preaching of the first generation of the Church, the preaching we encountered in *Acts*, and the written Gospel. As one scholar commented: "It is undoubtedly true that Mark's Gospel reflects the ideas of the primitive Christian *Kerygma*, but it does this because the earliest preaching rested upon what Jesus had done and taught." And so in a very real sense the *Gospel of Mark* is a work of true history.

Unity of the Two Testaments.

The importance of a familiarity with the Old Testament to understand the Gospels more deeply is illustrated by the first lines of St. Mark's Gospel: "*The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" To fully appreciate the utterly remarkable events of the Gospel and the wonder they generated, to grasp the amazing truth that God appeared before us clothed in humanity, we must already be familiar with the marvelous history of God's involvement with His people as depicted in the Old Testament. In those books, God's grandeur is sung, and we are told that no one can look upon God and survive. We are told that no one can imagine or represent by the work of his hands the omnipotent God. Is it any wonder, then, that the Apostles were slow to grasp the truth about Jesus Christ?

Mark in the Liturgy.

The Gospel of Mark is the centerpiece of the Liturgy of the Word at most Sunday Masses throughout Year B of the three-year liturgical sequence.

Be Doers of the Word.

The loving gaze of Christ is directed toward us just as it once was directed at the rich young man described in Mk 10:17-27. We must return that gaze; and so, in our reading of Mark's Gospel, let us gaze lovingly on Christ, our Savior. Let us listen to Him as He speaks with the father of the stricken son and tells him that all things are possible to the person of faith [Mk 9:14-28]. Our reading of Mark's Gospel, then, must lead to action. Notice, too, the prominence Mark gives to Jesus' humanity, something that should remind us that a truly spiritual life cannot neglect such human virtues as kindness, hospitality and cheerfulness. As you read Mark's Gospel, place a check in the margin of those passages that emphasize Jesus' humanity. Jesus Christ calls us to be redeemed men and women, not angels!

Some Final Observations on Mark's Gospel.

- † For Mark, Jesus is the consummation of history. He inaugurates God's reign by the defeat of evil and death and will come at the end of time to gather God's elect. The community is to heal as Jesus healed, to be alert for the reality of evil and the coming of grace, and to follow in the way of Jesus.
- † Jesus announces, enacts and embodies the reign of God, an experience of transformation that touches every aspect of human life.
- † Jesus' ministry is primarily one of exorcism and healing: destroying death; liberating from illness and all its personal and social ramifications; challenging the "healthy" to be open to others and to God.
- † Jesus is, in a sense, the "parable of God": mysterious, luminous, profound, transcendent.
- † Paradoxically, Jesus reveals the power of God in weakness; he is the true suffering servant, the Son of Man who gives His life for many.
- † The life-giving mission of Jesus meets rigorous opposition and is embroiled in conflict, a conflict that ultimately has its roots in the demonic. Even those close to Jesus seem unable to understand who He is or grasp the spirit of His mission.
- † Jesus gathers disciples and creates a community; but it is a fragile community, one prone to misunderstanding, confusion and weakness. The force of suffering takes a terrible toll on this community.
- † The way of discipleship is to follow in the way of Jesus, a way that at times demands near heroic commitment. While most of the disciples fail miserably and publicly, certain other characters in the Gospel reveal the nature of true discipleship.
- † Mark's Gospel ends with the empty tomb, with the seed bursting with life, with death destroyed, with bodies healed, and with the community reconciled and following the way.

Study Questions:

1. Why do you think Mark preserved the account of the cure of the paralytic (Mk 2:1-12) in his Gospel?
2. Do you see any connection between Mark's collection of parables in chapter 4 and the Crucifixion?
3. One source of Mark's Gospel is the preaching of St. Peter. Does 1 Peter 1 support this statement? How?
4. In what respect is Mark's Gospel a book of faith? Does the timing of its writing support this?
5. What kind of portrait of Jesus do we get from Mark's Gospel?
6. Read Mk 1:11, Mt 3:17 and Lk 3:22. What is the attitude of God the Father toward Jesus?