

An introduction to Mark's gospel

A note on resources:

Bad: BST and Tyndale commentaries.
Useful: Lane, Cranfield (tricky)
Paul Barnett, *The servant king*
Tim Keller, *Kings Cross*
Andrew Sach, *Dig Deeper Still* (forthcoming)

Introduction: Why and how should we study Mark's gospel?

Studying a gospel brings us close to the PERSON and WORK of Jesus.

Christ is the centre of all the Scriptures. His life, death and resurrection are the central events in salvation history. Forgiveness and salvation come as we come to Christ – as we understand who he is and what he's done, and so are moved by the sovereign power of God to repent and believe.

So, it's a wonderful thing to engage with Christ in the pages of a gospel. We'll be invited, each one of us, to turn from sin and trust in Christ, be it for the first or the umpteenth time.

So I'm hugely excited that we're teaching Mark's gospel this year! (We'll be spending two or three terms in Mark in our midweek fellowship groups. This term the children and young people are all going to be in Mark too).

Our aim this morning is to get to know Mark's gospel a bit better. That'll be good for us as we lead groups... or are group members... or as we look to read a gospel through with an unbelieving friend.

(Here's one encouragement if you are fairly familiar with Mark's gospel: *listen as a river, not as a reservoir* – i.e. don't just listen for yourself, but be thinking "Who can I pass this on to?" in the spirit of 2 Timothy 2:2).

1. Understand Mark's purpose (1:1)

Have a look at Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ the Son of God." Straightaway we learn this:

a) Mark is writing gospel

The word "gospel" means "good news." Mark selects and arranges his material about Jesus in order to teach the good news.

Notice that it's good news – it's not good advice. It's not chiefly about we are to do, but about what Jesus has done. Good news is the kind of message which causes people to rejoice or to weep.

It's the good news about Jesus as Mark (under the Spirit's inspiration) presents it. So our aim must be to understand the gospel as Mark teaches it. Not the gospel of our favourite tract or gospel presentation (e.g. Two Ways to Live). Not even the gospel as mediated by the Christianity Explored course, excellent as it is. We want to hear the Spirit's voice in Mark.

b) Mark is not writing a biography

It's not a comprehensive life story. There's nothing on Jesus' birth or early life. Half of the gospel is given over to the last week of Jesus' life. It's not a biography – it's a gospel, the testimony of the good news about

Jesus, as recorded by Mark. It's deliberately selective. So, an important question to constantly ask is this: "Why has Mark written this? How does this preach the gospel to us?"

c) Mark is historical – but he's not writing history

He doesn't write chronological history – he's writing this "gospel." Under the Spirit's inspiration he deliberately arranges his material to make a particular point – to teach us the gospel. As do other Bible writers.

2. Grasp his method

How does Mark expect us to understand "gospel"?

a) Mark is not like Romans

There's not a systematic line of argument, with loads of conjunctions, etc.

b) Mark isn't like John

He doesn't explicitly explain his structure like John does in 20:30-31.

c) Mark isn't like Matthew or Luke

Here's one difference: Mark rarely gives us a narrator's comment to explain what is going on. For example in Luke 18:1 we read "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." It's an explanation. There are very few such comments in Mark. He gives us very few explicit clues about how to interpret a passage. Rather, Mark expects us to note how he arranges his material. These are the key questions:

Why?

Why here?

Group work:

Mark 15:33-39. What is surprising about v38? Why is it there?

Mark 8:22-26. Why are these verses here?

3. Pursue Mark's big themes (introduced in 1:1-15)

Mark 1:1-15 is an introduction to the whole gospel. Here Mark sets out the key themes of the gospel, which the rest of the book will flesh out.

a) Theme 1: Jesus' identity

In Mark 1:1 we read of "the Christ the Son of God." These are two key terms that have to do with Jesus' identity. Later on in the gospel they're both really important. But what do they mean?

What does Christ mean? (See 1:1 – then later at 8:29). It means Messiah or literally "anointed one". It's talking about God's promised king, for back in Old Testament times kings weren't crowned they were "anointed."

What does Son of God mean? (See 1:1, 1:11 – then later at 9:7, 12:6, 13:32, (14:36), 15:39. Jesus also is called "Son" by the demons, see 3:11, 5:7, cf. 1:24). "Son of God" may be synonymous with "Christ" (see 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm where "Son" and "Christ" seem to have the same meaning.

Or it may be that “Son of God” speaks of Jesus’ identity in a deeper way. It may have Trinitarian connotations and certainly speaks of the bonds of love between God the Father and God the Son. (e.g. 1:11 and 9:7, “This is my son whom I love” ; e.g. 12:6, “one last one, a son.”)

However, we don’t want to push the difference too far. Together these terms speak of Jesus...

- As Lord and ruler.
- In his perfect relationship with his Father.

And our key point for now is simply this: that the rest of the gospel will flesh out and prove to us that Jesus is indeed the Christ the Son of God.

b) Theme 2: Jesus’ mission

In Mark 1:2-3 we learn that Jesus is coming as God himself in order to judge and to save. How do we understand that from these verses? We need to look up those OT verses which Mark quotes and read them in their original contexts. He quotes from Malachi 3:1 and from Isaiah 40:3

Malachi 3:1-3, ““See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. ² But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.”

Isaiah 40:1-5, “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice of one calling: “In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken”.”

When the New Testament quotes the old we need to ask this: What’s the point being made in the OT passage? And what point is the NT trying to make by quoting it?

Malachi 3 tells us that a messenger will come... before God comes... in order to do a work of fiery judgement. Isaiah 40 tells that a voice will cry out... before the Lord comes... to bring comfort to his people.

What’s Mark doing in referring to these passage? He’s telling us that the Gospel will show us and prove to us that this Jesus is God’s judge and God’s saviour – in fact, he is God himself, come to do his work.

c) Theme 3: Your response to the good news about Jesus

In Mark 1:14-15 we hear Jesus’ first public words. “Repent and believe the good news.” This is the right response to the gospel of God. Turn away from your sin and turn towards Christ. Trust in him and rest in him. Don’t trust in yourself and in your own endeavours.

And the key point for us now? The rest of the gospel will flesh out what it means to respond to the good news about Jesus. It will hold out the right response to us. Also, it will warn us against a wrong response to the gospel.

We can sum up those three themes very simply: *Who is Jesus? Why did Jesus come? What does it mean to follow him?* Or we can put it even more simply: WHO? WHY? WHAT? Make sure you imprint those themes on your brain.

Group work:

From your reading of Mark jot down (some of) what we learn of each big theme and where in the Gospel it comes:

WHO?

WHY?

WHAT?

Just before we go on let me mention one key response to the gospel of Christ. It's that of "service." Mark's Gospel is a training manual for servants of Christ. It's not just intended by the Lord to lead people to faith in Christ for the first time. It's goal is also to grow servants of Christ. Those parts of the gospel story that Mark includes which the other gospels *don't* include often relate to service. Service matters to Mark.

Please note these key verses, climaxing in 10:45...

Mark 8:34, "Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Mark 9:34, "But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.
³⁵ Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all"."

Mark 10:45, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"."

Mark 10:47, "When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!""

These are words of encouragement to every Christian – and particularly those called to any form of leadership in God's church. Deny self... be last... serve like Jesus served... cry out for mercy. That's we want the Lord to which in each one of us. That's the way in which he wants us to work and serve ourselves.

4. Recognise his structures

How does Mark structure his gospel?

a) Two halves?

It's often said of Mark's gospel that it's a game of two halves

The first half of Mark's gospel runs from 1:1-8:30. The question of Jesus' identity is uppermost here. WHO is he? Thus, we start with the statement in 1:1 that Jesus is the Christ mirrored right at the end of this section in 8:29 as Peter says "You are the Christ." So, much of the material in chapters 1-8 is seeking to prove Jesus' identity.

The second half of Mark's gospel runs from 8:31-16:8. The issue here has more to do with WHY Jesus came and WHAT it means to follow him. For example, here we read Jesus' threefold prediction of his death (8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34), of his work of judgement (especially in chapters 11-13), and the nature of discipleship (eg. 8:34, 9:35, 10:45, 10:47).

But this isn't a tight division. In the first half we get the "why" as well. For example, from 6:30 to 10:45 focuses on Jesus as redeemer. Especially we note the feeding of the 5,000 which is the most important miracle in Mark; it teaches us that Jesus is our Redeemer and that he's the same Redeemer who worked the mighty Exodus.

In the first half of the gospel we also get the "what" of discipleship. For example, following Jesus is a call to "listen" (e.g. 4:1-20) and a call not to be afraid but to trust (4:35-5:43).

So, thinking of Mark's gospel as a game of two halves is broadly but not exclusively true.

b) Sets of three

Mark often groups related incidents together in groups of three. For example, we see this at 1:40-2:17, at 2:18-3:6, and at 4:35-5:47.

Why does Mark do this? For a couple of reasons. First, to indicate that the events interpret each other. We don't read them in isolation, but together. Second, to highlight comparisons and contrasts between the events.

Group work:

Look at the three incidents in 1:40-2:17. What does each have in common?

What is the different focus of each?

How might we read 1:40-45 differently if it weren't in this context?

c) Repeated words and phrases

Sometimes Mark repeats key words or phrases – and often does so three times. Here (appropriately!) are three examples!

First, in 7:14-23 we're told three times what it is that makes a man unclean. It's what comes from inside that renders us unclean.

Second, Jesus' death is predicted by Christ himself three times (8:31, 9:31, 10:32-34).

Third, three times Jesus explain why it is that he has "come" (1:38, 2:17, 10:45) put these three mission statements together and you get a brilliant insight into the work of Jesus. together and you get a brilliant insight into the work of Jesus. He has come to preach (not heal), forgive (but how?) and as a servant who will give his life as a ransom for many.

(In passing we note that this corrects the picture of Jesus that you get from many commentaries on Mark. He is often portrayed as a man of action, not least because of the slightly breathless way in which Mark moves from incident to incident. But that's to overlook something deeper: he came to preach and to save.)

d) "Sandwiches"

What do we mean by a sandwich? It's where Mark starts off with one subject... then moves to another (sometimes apparently unrelated)... and then comes back to the first one. Why does Mark do this? Because the two subjects are connected, and they help explain each other. Here are three examples – the first two I'll explain, the third you can look at in groups.

What's the sandwich in 5:21-43? Jairus' daughter is sick... a woman interrupts... then Jairus' daughter is dead. What's the effect of the woman's interruption? It's to turn a major crisis (sickness) into an apparently insurmountable one (death).

What's the sandwich in 11:12-21? We read of a fig tree... then the cleansing of temple... then the fig tree again. What's the point? Jesus' curses the fig tree and it dies. We're meant to understand that Jesus is doing the same thing to them temple – it is now judged and "dead."

In groups discuss the sandwich in Mark 14:1-11...

Group work:

Look at 14:1-11. What are the elements of the sandwich? What point do they *together* make?

Did you notice...

vv1-2, there's a plot, in which Jesus' enemies they think they're in control

vv3-9, there's a right response to Jesus, and Jesus is in control

vv10-11, there's a plot, in which Jesus' enemies they think they're in control

The point of the sandwich in 14:1-11? Wicked men sought to put Jesus to death. However in parallel to the scheming of old Israel and the failure of new Israel is God's sovereignty. It is God's timetable that those who plot against Jesus will fulfil- Jesus will in fact be killed 'during the feast' (v.2) because it is God's will that he be killed then, demonstrating that he is the Passover lamb. Similarly the anointing of Jesus by the woman serves to underline God's sovereignty;

5. Investigate his use of the Old Testament

It's significant when Mark quotes from or alludes to the OT. The key question to ask: WHY does Mark quote this or allude to this?

Look up the OT passage. Read around the wider section (for, almost always it's the wider section that's being referred to). And then ask that question "WHY does Mark quote this?" What point is he making by quoting from the OT. We've seen one example already, in those quotes from Malachi and Isaiah in 1:1-3.

Group work:

Look at Mark 11:17. Why the quote from Jeremiah 7:8-11? What's the point?

6. An outline of Mark's gospel

Test!

On a separate sheet match each summary statement to the section in Mark's gospel that it describes.

1:1-15	The Son of God promised in the OT is here – so repent and believe!
1:16-39	Jesus demonstrates his kingly authority over men and Satan. He uses his authority to preach.
1:40-2:17	Jesus Christ has authority to forgive sins – and that’s why he has come.
2:18-3:6	Jesus is God. He determines how the OT is interpreted and how his creation is ordered. But human religion rejects him.
3:7-35	Jesus is rejected by the old Israel. He calls a new Israel – a new people of God who will do God’s will.
4:1-34	Jesus’ kingdom is established through God’s Word (despite appearances). So listen carefully. Our response to the Word determines Jesus’ response to us.
4:35-5:43	Jesus reveals his rule over nature, Satan, sickness and death. People respond with either fear or faith.
6:1-30	Jesus is rejected – and his followers are prepared for rejection too. Why? Because their hearers won’t repent.
6:30-56	Jesus has come as the rescuer-Messiah. But the disciples don’t understand Jesus’ identity and mission.
7:1-23	Jesus exposes what our hearts are like. This is what he’s come to rescue us from. Man-made religion is part of the problem, not the solution.
7:24-8:10	Jesus came first for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles – for any who humbly trust in Him for rescue.
8:11-30	Jesus is the Christ. But a miracle is needed to reveal to people who he is.

8:31-9:1	Jesus must be killed. His followers must suffer also, trusting that Jesus' future return means present suffering is worth it.
9:2-29	God's Son will return in splendour – so listen to him. The last days are here and Jesus is sovereign over evil – so trust him.
9:30-50	Jesus must die. His followers must serve like Jesus, not want to be great. We need Jesus to die, because sin and hell are inescapable.
10:1-31	It's impossible for man to gain eternal life by his own effort. But God makes it possible when someone comes to Jesus.
10:32-52	Jesus will die in the place of others. So humbly follow him.
11:1-25	Jesus is God's long-expected King. He comes to rescue – but also to judge Israel and her religion.
11:27-12:17	The representatives of Israel reject Jesus. But he will reject them: though killed he will rise in judgement and found a new people of God.
12:18-44	The Lord is the God of resurrection power. So give God his due – by honouring his Son as Lord.
13:1-37	Jesus the judge of all will return soon. Keep on following Jesus and don't be led astray.
14:1-26	In fulfilment of Scripture Jesus the Passover lamb goes willingly to his death, inaugurating the new covenant.
14:27-52	In his death Jesus will bear God's wrath. The sin of Jesus' followers makes clear that man will contribute nothing to his salvation.
14:53-15:15	Jesus is the innocent, suffering king – who is rejected by all.
15:16-39	God's king is forsaken by God in his death. But in his death he judges old Israel and brings salvation to a new people.
15:40-16:8	Jesus definitely died and rose again. He is the Christ who will gather together the new people of God.

1:1-15	
1:16-39	
1:40-2:17	
2:18-3:6	
3:7-35	
4:1-34	
4:35-5:43	
6:1-30	
6:30-56	
7:1-23	
7:24-8:10	
8:11-30	

8:31-9:1	
9:2-29	
9:30-50	
10:1-31	
10:32-52	
11:1-25	
11:27-12:17	
12:18-44	
13:1-37	
14:1-26	
14:27-52	
14:53-15:15	
15:16-39	
15:40-16:8	