

MARK

This is the first lesson looking at the book of Mark. As we study the four "Gospels," it's worth refreshing our memory about these four books that begin the New Testament. Referred to as the Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John provide us an account of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and his instructions to the Apostles and, ultimately, to us.

Almost immediately, we will notice that Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar in many ways, and we examine some of those similarities as we begin our study of Mark. Of note, John's Gospel is distinctly different from the other three. The first three books are similar in language, in the material they include, and in the order of events and sayings from the life of Christ. However, in all three books, chronology is not a driving factor—thus requiring the reader to discern the proper chronological order after reading the book itself. These similarities result in Matthew, Mark and Luke being referred to as the "Synoptic Gospels," (seeing together). By studying all three, we get a complete picture as seen together across these Gospels. In an analytical way, we can see this with 91 percent of Mark's Gospel contained in Matthew, while only 53 percent of Mark's Gospel is found in Luke.

In contrast to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) that cover all of Jesus' life and ministry, plus his death and resurrection, John wrote a different "Gospel;," he wrote with a clearly different intent as stated in John 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." John wants his readers to know for a certainty that Jesus is the Christ, and that our salvation is assured if we put our faith solely in him.

I will also point out that although Mark's Gospel follows Matthew's in the order of the Gospels, it appears that Mark's Gospel was probably written first and used as a source for Matthew and Luke. This is one of two opinions about why so many similarities appear in the three books. Mark was a disciple of Peter and followed him closely. It is believed he recorded Peter's sermons and teachings, and used these notes as one source for his gospel. It also appears that, like Matthew and Luke, Mark used oral tradition and other written fragments or notes, see for example Luke 1:1-4.

There remains much debate about whether Mark borrowed from Matthew and Luke or whether they borrowed from him. In my personal opinion, it seems reasonable to believe that Mark was used as source by Matthew and Luke, both of whom wrote their accounts later. Mark's appears to be first, but even here there is disagreement.

However, we do know that Mark stayed close to Peter, with the exception of his missionary trip with Paul and Barnabas, Mark's cousin. Leaving in the middle of the mission trip, for an undisclosed reason Paul would refuse to take him on additional trips. Mark would move to Cyprus and serve with Barnabas, eventually traveling to Rome where he again worked with Paul. Later, he would serve with Peter in Rome as well.

Given the above background, let's read Mark Chapter 1 and consider the following questions:

1. Mark begins his Gospel by telling us that this is the beginning of the good news. What was the beginning, and what was the "good news" he was referring to? (see Mark 1:1-3)
 - a. ANSWER 1: The beginning of the good news was the arrival and ministry of John the Baptist. He was the messenger prophesied in Isaiah who was to come prior to the arrival of the Messiah, preparing the way for him.
 - b. ANSWER 2: The good news is that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God. This is good because it means an end to the slavery and death brought about by sin. The Jews would have also seen it as good news because they believed the coming Messiah would free them from Roman tyranny and establish the Jews once again as a dominate nation.

2. The picture that we see in Mark 1:4-8 is truly remarkable: John the Baptist preaching—not in the city of Jerusalem, but in the wilderness. I have been fortunate enough to have traveled through that area, and wilderness it is indeed. Mark tells us that "the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem" came to him. Can you imagine how large a crowd that this would have been—"all" of the Judean countryside and Jerusalem? They were hungry for the good news, and once they heard John the Baptist's message, they confessed their sins and were baptized by him in the Jordan River. What do you suppose was so different about John the Baptist's message? What were they hearing that they had not already heard from the Chief Priests and Elders of the day?
 - a. ANSWER: John was preaching, announcing that the Jews needed to repent of their sins, since the Messiah was coming. This meant that the Jews had to acknowledge that they had fallen short of God's commands, and the public act of baptism was an outward sign of this repentance. They were doing what was needed to be done in order to prepare for the coming Messiah. However, this was not a message or teaching of the day on the part of the Chief Priests and Elders. Rather, it was a new and fresh message, that drew thousands to John who would baptize them in the Jordan River.
3. During John's ministry, while he is baptizing penitents in the Jordan River, Jesus comes and is baptized as well. Traveling down from the region of Galilee, Jesus would have been approximately thirty years old at the time; and He was likely baptized in the stretch of Jordan River near Jericho. If you have ever had the opportunity to travel to Jordan or Israel and see the Jordan River, it is a beautiful site, as I can personally attest, having also visited Jericho, which lies very close the Jordan River. What a model Jesus painted for us on that day in the Jordan! Mark then tells us what happens next to Jesus. Look carefully at Mark's brief account, and then Matthew's more detailed account. Who leads Jesus into the wilderness, and when is Jesus tempted by Satan? (see both Mark 1:9-13 and Matthew 4:1-11)
 - a. ANSWER: Jesus is led into the desert by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, where he will fast and reflect on his coming ministry for forty days. Then, after the forty days, he is tempted by Satan. Think of it: Satan tempting him as soon as he was led into the desert wouldn't have been much of a test. The Holy Spirit wanted Jesus to have the forty days of preparation and reflection. Now, after forty days of fasting and praying, Satan confronts Jesus, and as we know it was no contest: Jesus defeated Satan and would continue to do so throughout his ministry, continuing through his death on the cross, and resurrection.
4. After Jesus leaves the wilderness, he returns to the region of Galilee and begins announcing the "Good News," or Gospel. He proclaims that "The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!" Arriving in Galilee, he begins to call his disciples: Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew, and James the son of Zebedee and his brother John. All four are fisherman in the sea or lake called Galilee. What is significant about the response of these four brothers? It is particularly clear in the response of James and John. (see Mark 1:14-20)
 - a. ANSWER 1: All four of them leave their means of employment and immediately follow Jesus, without question. What we need to see from this picture is what the immediate cost of that decision meant to them, especially James and John. The scriptural text tells us "... and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men..." James and John were from a wealthy family. Their father Zebedee was clearly wealthy and had a crew of hired men helping his family's fishing business. Not only were James and John leaving the fishing boat, they were leaving their father, family, wealth, and the security of a nice home (probably in Bethsaida) to follow Jesus. It was clearly a life-changing event for each of them; they literally left everything behind.
 - b. ANSWER 2: It also shows us that Jesus doesn't want our money, influence, business, family connections, etc.; he wants to save each of us from this world and he charges us with helping him to build his Church. Perhaps not all of us have been called to leave everything and follow him, but that should be our heart's desire. In Matthew, Christ teaches us to use every day to "seek first the Kingdom of God," and that should be our soul's desire, just as it was with these four brothers.
5. Next, we find Jesus in Capernaum. This city will serve as his primary home during most of his ministry, and he will teach regularly in the synagogue there. Today you can visit that synagogue, rebuilt since Jesus' time, but still visible is the foundation. As you stand there, it is easy to picture Jesus teaching, surrounded by the men of the city as they lean in to hear what this new rabbi has to say about the scriptures. Imagine their amazement when something happened during Jesus' teaching. What happened, and what purpose did it serve? (see Mark 1:21-28)
 - a. ANSWER: A man possessed by an evil spirit confronts Jesus while he is teaching. They are amazed at the authority with which Jesus is teaching, but then they are even more amazed when they observe his power over the spirit world. This event showed them that Jesus was more than just a teacher, and that he also had power over the demons.

6. In addition to demonstrating his power over the world of demons, what else does this event show us? Did the man have just one evil spirit? Did the evil spirits recognize Jesus and know that he was the Messiah? Can we infer from this that knowing who God is, knowing who Jesus is, isn't enough to save us? What do you think after reading this passage?
 - a. ANSWER 1: There is only one evil spirit in the man. It refers to "us" in telling Jesus that he—this man's evil spirit—like all of the demons ("us"), recognizes immediately who Jesus is, i.e., the Messiah, the "Holy One." He knows that Jesus can destroy them, which is why he asks Jesus the question. But rather than have a dialogue with the demon, Jesus simply commands him to leave, which he does immediately.
 - b. ANSWER 2: Clearly this passage, like so many in the Bible, shows us that simply having a knowledge of God and his Son Jesus is not sufficient for salvation, since even Satan and the demons know these things. It is only when we surrender our will to God's will, repent of our sins, and believe on his Son Jesus, that we can have salvation. This is something Satan and the demons will never do. Unfortunately, this is also true for lost mankind; many will never submit to God, repent and be saved—even though they know that God exists and that Jesus is His only Son.
7. Next, we observe Jesus at Peter's home in Capernaum, healing people and driving out demons. Interestingly, he also demonstrates his power over the demons in these verses by not allowing the demons to speak because they knew who he was. He wanted people to come to a knowledge of him based on his teachings and what they saw; he needed no help from a bunch of demons. He healed and drove out demons from so many people at Peter's home that, early the next morning, he needed to have some time away. His actions in this matter are an example for us as well in that we should allocate time away from the crush of the daily routine to pray and seek God's direction. Jesus was doing this when Peter and the other disciples found him. They wanted him to stay at Capernaum and continue healing and casting out demons. However, Jesus had a different plan; what was it, and why did he say it was his plan? (see Mark 1:29-39)
 - a. ANSWER: Jesus wanted to go to the other villages around the sea of Galilee, and he wanted to go to them to preach. He wanted to do this because he knew that "this is why I have come." As remarkable as healing and casting out demons was, it was secondary to his real purpose: proclaiming the Good News of salvation. The disciples had not yet grasped this, but they followed him as he preached in the synagogues and continued to drive out demons as the opportunity presented itself.
8. The picture we see in Mark 1:40-45 is that of "cleaning the unclean." Jesus now demonstrates he can truly do the miraculous by touching the untouchable and cleaning the uncleanable. It is a remarkable scene in itself, but it is even more remarkable in that Jesus commanded the cured leper not to tell anyone. Over and over again, Jesus did not want notoriety nor an early announcement of his messiahship until He was ready to proclaim it. He wanted the Jews to hear his teaching, his preaching, and see the signs of his kingship before declaring it to them. There was also a practical side to this command, i.e., what happened to Jesus' preaching campaign in the villages of the Galilee, once the man told everyone what had happened?
 - a. ANSWER: As a result of the man ignoring Jesus' command, Jesus could no longer preach in each village and was forced to stay outside of the cities and towns in lonely and remote places. Driving his ministry out into the wilderness did not stop people from coming to see and hear him; the closing verse in the first chapter of Mark tells us that "people still came to him from everywhere."

Closing our study of the first chapter of Mark, we see Christ already engaged in spreading the Good News to gatherings of large crowds, as he works his way around the Sea of Galilee with his four fishermen/disciples close at hand. Concluding this phase of his preaching campaign, Jesus returns home to Capernaum at the beginning of Chapter 2.

Just as Jesus came to proclaim the good news, so we are to continue to do the same. Jesus came so that all could have eternal life through him. As we have seen in this lesson, it is not sufficient to simply know that God exists and that Jesus is His only Son. We have to repent of our sins and believe on Jesus; only then will we be saved, re-born, and given a new and eternal life. Praise God for His Son and for the eternal hope we have in Him!

Have a greet week everyone!

In Christ,

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