

## THE EARLIEST GOSPEL

### Mark 1–16

Scholars have discovered that the Gospel of Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels—the one on which Matthew and Luke largely depend for their accounts. Thus, Mark was the first person to develop the literary form known as a *Gospel*. The shortest and most compact of the four Gospels, Mark is written in a vivid, direct style that gives the impression of being an eyewitness account of the events it records.

Throughout this Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as a man of action. The author uses as his theme a journey—both for Jesus and for those who would follow Him. Jesus journeys through Galilee, makes six boat trips on the Sea of Galilee, travels from Galilee to Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem makes three visits to the temple. Mark invites the reader to follow Christ through conflict and crisis, through opposition and rejection, and on the way to discover that God’s purposes are fulfilled through the suffering of His Son.

The Gospel of Mark can be roughly divided into two halves; the first portrays Jesus’ ministry in Galilee (chapters 1–9), and the second His ministry in Judea and Jerusalem (chapters 10–16). Mark begins his account with the appearance of John the Baptist, followed by the baptism of Jesus and a brief comment on the temptation of Jesus. He concludes his introduction with a capsule of Jesus’ message, “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*” (1:15). Next is a series of 14 brief stories depicting Jesus as a teacher, healer, and exorcist in and around Capernaum. Often Jesus’ teachings conflict with those of the Jewish authorities of His day. In chapter 4, Mark records a number of parables; in each parable Jesus uses common experiences and images to tell who God is and what people may become.

Mark resumes his account of Jesus’ ministry by listing 17 more episodes. The first half of the Gospel reaches a crescendo when Jesus asks His disciples, “*Who do people say that I am?*” Peter responds, “*You are the Christ*” (8:27–29). Jesus then explains that He must suffer and die and that whoever desires to be His disciple must be prepared to do the same. This sobering pronouncement is followed by Jesus’ glorious transfiguration. Another series of stories unfolds as Jesus journeys to Jerusalem for the Passover. In these encounters, Jesus reinforces the message that both Messiahship and discipleship involve suffering.

Chapter 13 is an account of Jesus’ discourse on the last times. Chapters 14–15 conclude the story of the Lord’s passion with accounts of His rejection not only by Jewish religious leaders and Roman politicians but also by His own disciples. As the Last Supper, arrest, and trial move Jesus toward crucifixion, He experiences utter abandonment yet suffers silently, “*like a sheep that before its shearers is silent*” (Isaiah 53:7). In the oldest manuscripts, the Gospel ends with an angel announcing the Resurrection.

**AUTHORSHIP AND DATE** The Gospel of Mark nowhere mentions the name of its author, which is true of the other Gospels as well. The titles of each of the four Gospels were added in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, based on the knowledge of the church fathers. The Mark credited with authorship was probably John Mark, to whom the New Testament makes several scattered references. His mother, Mary, was an influential woman of Jerusalem who possessed a large house and servants. The early church gathered in her house during Peter’s imprisonment under Herod Agrippa. John Mark went with Barnabas and Saul when they returned from Jerusalem to Antioch after their famine relief visit. Shortly thereafter, Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. At Perga, John Mark left the journey for an undisclosed reason. His departure later caused a rift between Paul and Barnabas when they needed to choose their companions for the second missionary journey. Paul was unwilling to take Mark again and chose Silas instead; Barnabas persisted in his choice of Mark, who was his cousin, and returned with him to his homeland of Cyprus.



John Mark is not heard of again until a decade later. Then he is mentioned by Paul—and in favorable terms. Paul asks the Colossians to welcome Mark, no longer as an assistant but as one of his “*fellow workers*” (Philemon 24). During his imprisonment in Rome, Paul tells Timothy to bring Mark with him to Rome “*for he is very useful to me for ministry*” (2 Timothy 4:11). One final reference to Mark comes from Peter, who is also in Rome; he affectionately refers to the young man as “*my son*” (1 Peter 5:13).

**THINK ABOUT** how John Mark, who left Paul and Barnabas in the middle of their missionary journey, was not defeated by his lapse from faithfulness. He matured and became a responsible and trusted worker. All of us will fail at some point. The important thing is that we repent of any sin, receive God’s forgiveness, forgive ourselves, and go on with our lives. Are you wrestling with any failures? If so, how does the story of Mark encourage you to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and make a fresh start?

It is likely that the Gospel was written for Gentile readers, and Roman Gentiles in particular. Mark translates Aramaic and Hebrew phrases (obviously familiar to Jews) by using their Greek equivalents; he incorporates a number of Latin idioms and phrases by transliterating them into Greek characters, and he explains Jewish customs unfamiliar to his readers. Finally, the emphasis on suffering discipleship seems to indicate that Mark composed his Gospel in order to strengthen Christians who had begun to suffer their first cruel persecutions at the hand of Nero.

**THEOLOGICAL EMPHASES** Mark writes to show that Jesus is God’s unique Son. At decisive points in his story, he gives clues to Jesus’ identity. At the Baptism (1:11) and Transfiguration (9:7), for example, the Father in Heaven calls Jesus “*My beloved Son,*” thus indicating that Jesus shares an unmatched relationship of love and obedience with the Father. Even demons recognize Jesus as God’s Son (1:24; 3:11; 5:7). Mark leaves no doubt about the identity of Jesus: He is God’s unique Son. The key discovery, however, is the fullness of God in Christ and the means by which the Father will achieve His purpose through the Son.

Mark shows Jesus entering fully into the problems of life. He is obedient to the will of the Father, even to death on a cross. Yet He is fully divine. Mark does not emphasize Jesus’ deity at the expense of His humanity. Jesus appears grieved, exasperated, angered, amazed, and fatigued. In no other Gospel is Jesus’ human nature so emphasized. Mark also vividly illustrates what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. There is an analogy here between Jesus’ ministry and His disciples’ ministry. His disciples are given tasks of proclamation and power over the forces of evil. But as the Son of Man serves in humility, so, too, must His disciples. Discipleship leads to self-denial and suffering. However, disciples discover that when they lose their lives, they find them in Christ.

**PERSONALIZE** this lesson. What do you believe about Jesus? If you already believe that He is God’s Son, what do you believe about His personality, His power in your life, and His love for those who follow Him? This study will give you an excellent opportunity to learn more about Jesus. As you begin, reflect on your current impressions of God’s Son. Ask God to use the study to dispel any misconceptions you might have about Jesus. And ask Him to open your heart to new insights and to help you apply what you are learning to your life.

### REVIEW: THE EARLIEST GOSPEL

1. As you begin this study, what questions do you have about Jesus? What do you hope to learn or gain from this study?
2. To you, what does it mean to follow Jesus? (As the study progresses, you may want to add to your answer.)