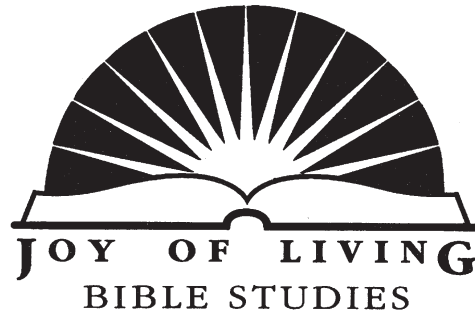


Highlights of the New Testament Lesson 2



The Gospel of Mark¹

Probable date of composition: A.D. 50-70

Probable place of writing: Rome

The Gospel of Mark was written by John Mark,² who figures prominently in the New Testament. His mother was named Mary, and she was a wealthy woman who owned a large house in Jerusalem. In Acts 12:12, we see that a large group of the early disciples gathered in Mary's house to pray for Peter's release from prison.³

Later in Acts, we see that Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. For some reason, Mark turned back at the city of Perga and returned to his mother's home, instead of continuing with Paul and Barnabas to Asia Minor (modern Turkey). Paul was profoundly disappointed in Mark, evidently labeling him as a quitter.

When Paul and Barnabas were preparing for another missionary journey, Mark became the cause of an argument between them. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them. Paul refused because Mark "had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work" (Acts 15:38). The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so severe that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark with him to Cyprus, and Paul selected a new companion, Silas, and set off north along the Mediterranean coast.

After this, Mark dropped out of sight for a time. The next we hear of him, Mark was an associate of Peter. The apostle Peter spoke affectionately of this young man, calling him "my son Mark" (1 Peter 5:13). Perhaps Peter, who failed Jesus and was restored, understood something that Paul didn't—a person who has failed can learn and grow from failure, and become even more valuable to God than someone who has never failed.⁴

A Pamphlet for Hard Times

A.D. 64 is remembered as the year of the great fire in Rome. For the Christian community, gathering in house-churches throughout the city, this year had begun like any other year.

1. This is an overview. You can study this material in more detail in the Joy of Living study titled *Gospel of Mark*.
2. Acts 12:12 designates him "John, also called Mark;" both names are used of him in subsequent passages (see also Acts 12:25; 13:5,13; 15:37-39).
3. Sections in italics are added by the Joy of Living editors.
4. Ray C. Stedman. *Gospel of Mark, Part 1* (Ventura: Joy of Living Bible Studies), p. 5.

Although the Christians were sometimes a topic for pagan gossip, the popular misrepresentations had not affected the growth of the movement. It was said that Christians were atheists because they refused to represent their God by an image. It was whispered that they were cannibals because they spoke of eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their Lord. They were taunted as incestuous because they called one another "Brother" and "Sister," and held their most sacred rites in connection with a meal they called the *Agape*, or love-feast, at which only Christians were permitted to be present. They were scorned as those who hated other people, because they refused to attend the spectacles in the circus or arena and kept themselves from the temples and pleasure arcades of the city. But there had been no police action against the Christians.

All of that changed in the aftermath of a devastating fire, which threatened to reduce the Eternal City to ash and rubble. The fire broke out in a congested area of cluttered shops and sprawling slums. Then a shift in the wind carried the violent flames to the adjacent Palatine Hill district, the site of the oldest settlement in Rome where Senators had built their homes among the venerable monuments of past Roman conquests. From there it spread rapidly throughout the city. When after six days it was thought the fire was under control, it broke out again and raged unchecked for two more weeks. Of the 14 districts of the city, only four were untouched by the flames. Three were leveled to the ground.

Nero had been absent from the city and returned only when his own palace was threatened. He responded to the disaster by ordering the construction of emergency accommodations for the homeless and the distribution of food. In the subsequent months he entered into an elaborate program of urban renewal, clearing debris and erecting houses, parks and streets at government expense. But these measures failed to win him any popular support. The people were seething with resentment. They firmly believed that the emperor himself had ordered the fire, because he intended to construct a new palace in the vicinity of the Circus Maximus, the first and largest stadium in ancient Rome. This suspicion was fueled by the persistent rumor that while the city was burning Nero had gone upon his private stage and celebrated the calamity by singing about the destruction by fire of ancient Troy.

It was to distract attention from such rumors that Nero ordered the imperial police to act against the Christians. "To suppress this rumor," the Roman historian Tacitus writes, "Nero fabricated scapegoats, and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians [as they were popularly called.]" Recognized Christians were arrest-

ed and tortured. On the basis of their information, large numbers of others were herded before Roman magistrates and condemned to death—not for the crime of arson, but because popular prejudice permitted the humiliation of the Christians. Tacitus writes: “Their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs, or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as a substitute for daylight. Nero provided his Gardens for the spectacle, and exhibited displays in the Circus, at which he mingled with the crowd, or stood in a chariot, dressed as a charioteer.” But he adds, “Despite their guilt as Christians, and the ruthless punishment it deserved, the victims were pitied. For it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man’s brutality rather than to the national interest.”¹

That turn of events forced the Christian community to go underground, literally. The catacombs, with their narrow underground tunnels and tomb-chambers cut in the soft rock, were regarded as places of sanctuary that might be exempt from police intrusion. In the climate of uncertainty created by the emperor’s action, Christians fled to the catacombs. Christian commitment could result in a martyr’s death.

A Pastoral Response

Among the Christian leaders in Rome was John Mark of Jerusalem. His presence in the city when the persecution began is certain from the closing greeting in Peter’s letter of warning to the churches of Asia Minor. Describing Rome by the code word “Babylon” (where Christians were now exiled and captive, even as Israel had been earlier), Peter conveys the greetings of the church and of “my son Mark” (1 Peter 5:13). The context speaks ominously of suffering “as a Christian” at a time when vindication can be expected only from God (see 1 Peter 4:12-19).

Like the apostle Peter, Mark recognized that frightened men and women would need to be strengthened before the testing of their faith. He prepared the earliest of the Gospels as a pastoral response to the crisis at Rome. His work can be described as a pamphlet for hard times. It is directed to a church that was the object of imperial persecution following the great fire. In the simple language of the marketplace, Mark brought together an account of Jesus’ deeds and words, which addressed the Christians of Rome with the directness characteristic of an apostolic sermon. The witness borne to Jesus was a remarkable record of Jesus’ commitment to His own followers, even when they failed to understand the significance of rejection, suffering and death in God’s plan for Him, and for them.

When it is remembered that Mark wrote to strengthen Christians and to provide them with a basis for faithfulness to Jesus at a time when Christian life was defined by the catacombs or the arena, the details of the Gospel take on added significance. The evangelist shows that a Christian can suffer no form of humiliation that has not been endured already by Jesus, his Lord.

Were Christians misrepresented and falsely labeled by pagans in Rome? Jesus had been labeled as deranged by His family (see Mark 3:21), and as demonic by officials from Jerusalem (see verses 22-30).

Were Christians sometimes betrayed to the authorities from within the circle of intimate friends? One of Jesus’ own disciples was Judas Iscariot, “who betrayed him” (verse 19). In the Gospel prepared by Mark, Christians discovered that nothing which they might suffer had been alien to the experience of Jesus.

Moreover, Jesus had spoken openly of the persecution that could be expected in the Christian life. He had warned about those who “have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Mark 4:17). When Jesus had promised those who followed Him “homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields,” He had added significantly, “and with them, persecutions” (Mark 10:30). Jesus warned that the day would come when those who were identified with Him would be beaten and would stand before governors and kings for His sake as witnesses to the truth. He had not kept from His disciples the cruel truth that brother would betray brother to death, and the father his child, and children their parents, and that His followers would be hated by all people because they belong to Him (see Mark 13:9-13). In the key statement on discipleship, Jesus had demanded a radical surrender of life and cross-bearing in response to His call (see Mark 8:34-38). That was now an actual experience for Mark’s readers in Rome. It had been the experience of Jesus as well, preceded by a trial before a Roman magistrate, scourging with the dreaded bone-tipped flagellum, and the cruel mockery of the local soldiers (see Mark 15:15-20).

It was the threat of such treatment that might motivate a person to deny that Jesus was his Lord. But if he did so, he would save his life only to experience rejection when Jesus returned at the last day in triumphal procession with the holy angels (see Mark 8:35-38).

The details of Mark’s Gospel are charged with meaning for men and women who were treated with contempt and humiliated because they bore the name of Jesus. Jesus had not rejected suffering and death. They could not do so either. God’s approval of the faithful obedience of His Son was evident to everyone when on the third day the tomb in which the crucified body of Jesus had been laid was empty. The final impression left with Mark’s reader is the eloquent witness of the empty tomb as interpreted by God’s messenger: “Don’t be alarmed... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you’” (Mark 16:6-7).

Jesus’ resurrection made clear that suffering, humiliation, and death were not the final word on the life of one who trusted God and remained true to Him. The solemn pledge that Jesus would meet with His shattered disciples in Galilee provided the hunted Christians of Rome with the assurance that Jesus remained committed to them as well. The special reference to Peter signified that Jesus’ commitment extended even to one who had denied his Lord (see Mark 14:66-72). Here was a basis for forgiveness for those who had denied they were Christians, and for their persecutors also.

In the pages of the pamphlet prepared by Mark, Christian men and women found encouragement to stand firm in their faith in spite of imperial persecution. The final word did not rest with a Roman magis-

1. Tacitus *Annals of Rome* 15.44.

trate or a brutal emperor. It rests with God who raises the dead, and who displays His glory before an unbelieving world through a people who remain faithful to Him.

The Structure of Confession

Men and women who openly admitted that they were Christians when dragged before a Roman magistrate were known as “confessors.” Confessing that “Jesus is Lord,” they could not acknowledge the lordship of the Caesar. They were prepared to seal their confession with their lifeblood. This readiness to die for Jesus gave to the term “confessor” (or “martyr”) a new meaning. The term originally meant one who bore witness to what he had seen or heard, but now it came to mean one who went to his death for what he believed.

When Mark wrote the opening line of his pamphlet he declared he was prepared to take his place among the ranks of the confessors: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Here Mark brings together two old Christian confessions: “Jesus is the Christ,”¹ and, “Jesus is the Son of God.” The confession that Jesus is the Christ affirmed that He was the one anointed by God to redeem the people from their sins. The confession that Jesus is God’s Son affirmed that He was the one uniquely qualified to achieve redemption for God’s people. Mark stands with the confessors in acknowledging Jesus’ dignity as Christ and Son of God.

The opening verse of the Gospel, however, does more than record the evangelist’s own confession. It provides an important clue to the structure of his Gospel. Mark gave to his work the structure of confession. The Gospel falls into two equal halves, and each part finds its climax in one of these two confessions.

The first half of the Gospel extends from Mark 1:1—8:30. *Its theme is “The Servant Who Rules,” and it tells of Jesus, the Servant who has all authority in heaven and earth.*² Its climax is reached in Mark 8:29, when Peter, a Jew, openly confesses that Jesus is the Christ. Every incident recorded in the initial half of Mark’s pamphlet has prepared his audience for this moment of recognition and confession. Prior to Mark 8:29, the disciples have responded to Jesus’ call (see Mark 1:16-20; 2:14; 3:13-19), but it is clear that they do not understand who Jesus is. They pose the question of His identity, but are unprepared to risk a daring response. When, for example, a sudden squall at sea had threatened their safety, and Jesus had calmed the turbulence with His sovereign word, “Quiet! Be still!” His terrified followers could only ask, “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:39,41).

The Jewish people had their own opinions. The popular consensus was that Jesus was a prophet. But the people were divided over whether He was a recent prophet, John the Baptist brought back from the dead (see Mark 6:14-16), the prophet Elijah who had returned to announce the day of final judgment, or one of the prophets from Israel’s remote past (see Mark 8:27-28). Not until Jesus’ pointed question

to the Twelve at Caesarea Philippi did He receive the response, “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29). Mark anticipated this moment of confession in Mark 1:1, when he spoke of Jesus the Christ, and when it arrives, the first half of the Gospel is brought to a rapid close.

The second half of the Gospel extends from Mark 8:31—16:8. *Its theme is “The Ruler Who Serves,” and it tells of the servant attitude of the Son of God, the rightful Ruler who comes to suffer and die for our sakes.*³ This section also clarifies what it means to confess that Jesus is the Christ. During this period, “Christ” was a rather slippery term. Although everyone knew it signified “the one anointed by God,” there was wide disagreement on what this actually meant. The word was a magnet attracting different hopes from different groups in Judaism. The term was like an empty container into which everyone poured his or her own expectations. The disciples were not different from others; they had their own set of expectations.

But Jesus had come from God to fulfill His mission, and He could not permit His disciples to fill the term “Christ” with their own dreams. That is why He immediately began to define what God intended “Christ” to mean. When He spoke of a rejected, suffering individual who would be killed, and after three days rise again, Peter was outraged (see 8:31-33); his definition of “Christ” and the one given by Jesus were poles apart! By recording this painful incident, Mark makes it clear that Peter had uttered the correct words and had made a splendid confession, but that he had no understanding of what God intended those words to mean.

The second half of Mark’s account is controlled by the theme of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, where the prophecy of His rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection is fulfilled. A full third of the Gospel is situated in Jerusalem (Mark 11-16), where Jesus was brought before the Roman magistrate, Pontius Pilate, who sentenced Him to be crucified on Golgotha (see Mark 15:1-20). But at the climax of the record, at the point of Jesus’ death, when He has finished what God sent Him to do, the centurion in charge of the execution squad exclaimed, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39).

The fact that it was a Roman who uttered these words was undoubtedly significant to the evangelist and to the persecuted Christians of Rome, for this moment of insight came when the centurion saw the manner in which Jesus met His death. Perhaps in their own deaths, as they honored the Lord by giving their lives, these persecuted Christians would cause others to come to the knowledge that truly Jesus is the Son of God.

Mark had begun his Gospel with the confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. With the confession of Peter, a Jew, and the confession of the Roman centurion, a Gentile, Mark emphasized that Jew and Gentile have joined their voices in acknowledging the divinity of Jesus, that He truly is the Son of God.

*The Gospel of Mark is the gospel story for people of all backgrounds, tribes, and classes. Of the four gospels, Mark is the truly multicultural gospel. It is intended for an international, multi-ethnic audience.*⁴

1. Or, “Jesus is the Messiah.” *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word rendered *Messiah*. It denotes that He was anointed or consecrated to his great redemptive work as Prophet, Priest, and King of his people. (<http://classic.net.bible.org/dictionary.php?word=Christ>)

2. *Gospel of Mark, Part 1*, p. 6.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Study Questions

Before you begin your study this week:

- ☞ Pray and ask God to speak to you through His Holy Spirit.
- ☞ Use only the Bible for your answers.
- ☞ Write down your answers and the verses you used.
- ☞ Answer the “Challenge” questions if you have the time and want to do them.
- ☞ Share your answers to the “Personal” questions with the class only if you want to share them.

First Day: Read the Commentary on the Gospel of Mark.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Commentary on the Gospel of Mark or from your teacher's lecture?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, or post it in a prominent place. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

3. This week's questions focus on the Gospel of Matthew. If you have time, you may want to read or skim through the entire book this week. As you answer the questions, you will be looking up passages of Scripture from various places in the Bible. This will help you discover that God's Word is a “whole,” and that His message to us is the same from Genesis to Revelation.

This lesson focuses on the Gospel of Matthew, which is the most complete account of Jesus' teachings. It was written to convince the writer's Jewish audience that Jesus was the Messiah descended from David, the One promised by the Old Testament prophets.¹ Matthew also gives strong support to the fact that God intended the gospel to be preached to Gentiles (non-Jews) as well as to Jews.

Second Day:

Matthew asserted that the messianic prophecies of the Old Testament received their fulfillment through Jesus.

1. In Matthew 1:1, how did Matthew identify Jesus?

2. What did God promise David in 2 Samuel 7:11b-13? These promises found their first fulfillment in David's son Solomon, but were ultimately fulfilled through David's later descendant, Jesus.

3. Read Isaiah 7:14, which was written about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. How does it compare to Matthew 1:20-23?

4. a. Read Micah 5:2, which was written over 600 years before the birth of Jesus. Where was the “ruler over Israel, whose origins are from... ancient times,” to be born?

1. *What the Bible Is All About Bible Handbook*, p 422.

- b. Read Matthew 2:1. Where was Jesus born?
-
5. a. From Matthew 2:1-2, why had the Magi traveled such a long distance?

b. From Matthew 2:11, what did they do when they saw Jesus?
-
6. Personal: What do you think it might have meant to Jewish believers in Matthew's day to know that Jesus had fulfilled so many Old Testament prophecies? Whether you are a Jewish believer in Christ or a Gentile believer, what does it mean to you that Jesus fulfilled these prophecies?

Third Day: Read Matthew 4:18-25.

When Jesus was about 30 years old, He began His public ministry and began calling His disciples—those who would be eyewitnesses to His power and teaching, and who would eventually carry on the work of the kingdom after Jesus returned to heaven.

1. What did Jesus say to Andrew and Simon Peter, and how did they respond? (Matthew 4:18-20)

2. How did James and John respond when Jesus called them? (Matthew 4:21-22)

3. What good news did Jesus preach? (Matthew 4:23)

4. What else did Jesus do? (Matthew 4:23-24)

5. a. How did the people respond? (Matthew 4:25)

b. Where did the crowds that followed him come from? (Matthew 4:25)

6. Personal: Have you chosen to follow Jesus? Have you allowed Him to make you a “fisher of men”—not bringing fish in from the sea, but bringing men and women to God? If you don't know what to say to someone, please look at “Do You KNOW You Have Eternal Life?” on page 4 at the beginning of this study guide to give you some ideas.

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2. From the following verses, write what Jesus did and what He had power over.

Matthew 8:2-3

Matthew 8:16

Matthew 8:23-26

Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25

3. Personal: When you consider who Jesus is and the power He has, you have to wonder why we worry. Write down 1 Peter 5:7 and personalize it by inserting your name.

Sixth Day:

Jesus had fulfilled prophecy and had shown His power. The people had cheered for Him and given him a king's welcome to Jerusalem, but the religious leaders rejected Him as king.

1. In Matthew 20:17-19, what did Jesus tell His disciples was going to happen?

2. From the following verses, what happened that fulfilled what Jesus had said to His disciples?

Matthew 26:48-49

Matthew 26:57

Matthew 27:1-2

Matthew 27:27-37, 50-54 (summarize briefly)

3. Read Isaiah 53:4-6, which was written about 700 years before the birth of Jesus. What did Jesus do for us by all that He went through?

4. a. People had thought Jesus was dead and that His kingdom had failed. What happened in Matthew 28:5-7?

b. Read Matthew 28:16-20, which takes place in Galilee. What did Jesus instruct His followers to do? What encouragement did He give them?

5. By His resurrection, Jesus assured His disciples (and us) that the King still lives, and that one day He will come back to establish His kingdom on earth. Read Matthew 25:31-32a. Who will be gathered before Him?

6. a. Although the Gospel of Matthew speaks to the Jewish heart, explaining who Jesus is, it also plainly reveals that God is concerned for the Gentiles. Read Acts 1:8. Where were the apostles to be witnesses for the Lord?

b. What does Romans 1:16 tell us about the gospel, and who it is for?

7. Personal: Are you eagerly anticipating the return of the King? If not, why not? If you are, why are you?