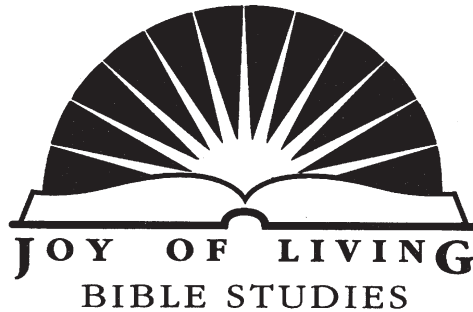


Gospel of Mark

Lesson 1



Introduction

According to the Wycliffe Bible translators, more than two thousand language groups in the world still do not have any portion of the Bible translated into their language. Those groups are found throughout the world—in Europe, Asia, Africa, the Pacific Islands, and the Americas. Some of these language groups are small; for example, the Dia language is spoken by no more than 1,880 people in a remote section of Papua New Guinea.

I once spent two weeks in Mexico, observing the work of Wycliffe Bible translators. While I was there, I learned that the gospel of Mark is the most widely translated book in the Bible. Almost all Wycliffe translators begin with Mark when they translate the Scriptures into a new language.

Why?

For one thing, it's the shortest of the four gospels, which makes the task of translation shorter and easier. But the brevity of Mark is not the only reason it is so widely translated.

I suspect that an even more important reason is the fact that Mark is an excellent introduction to 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, multiethnic audience. By contrast, the gospel of Matthew is written for Jewish people. That is why Matthew is so rich in Old Testament traditions and Jewish customs. Mark, however, was written for the cosmopolitan Roman world, for people who had no background in the Old Testament. Of the four gospels, Mark is the most easily understood by any audience.

Many scholars think that the gospel of Mark was the earliest book of the New Testament. It was probably written sometime during the A.D. 60s. Scholars differ on whether Mark was written before Matthew or Matthew before Mark, because it is hard to tell who borrowed from whom. We also know that almost the entire gospel of Mark is reproduced in Matthew and Luke (with the exception of a few verses), so it is clear that somebody borrowed from somebody else. But whether Matthew had a copy of Mark's account in front of him as he wrote, or vice versa, nobody knows.

The Author of the Gospel of Mark

We do know that this gospel was written by a young man named John Mark, 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.

Later in Acts, we see that John 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). Perhaps Mark was afraid of the robbers that awaited unwary travelers in the Pamphylian mountains. Paul was profoundly disappointed in John Mark, evidently labeling him as a quitter.

Later Paul and Barnabas were preparing for another missionary journey, and John Mark became the cause of an argument between them. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. Paul refused because John 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, John Mark dropped out of sight for a time. The next we hear of him, John 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.

Eusebius, a church father writing in the third century A.D., says that the early Christians were so moved and challenged by the stories Peter told them of his time with Christ that they asked Peter's companion, John Mark, to write them down as Peter told them. Perhaps that is how we got the gospel according to Mark. As you read it, you see that Peter figures greatly in the story, and it is easy to imagine that this gospel might reflect Peter's memories of Jesus.

Another possibility is intriguing to speculate on, although it is nothing more than speculation. There is a scene in the Garden of

Gethsemane that only Mark records. It takes place during the betrayal and arrest of Jesus.

Then everyone deserted him [Jesus] and fled. A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind. (Mark 14:50-52)

This unnamed young man stayed behind, following Jesus even after the other disciples ran away in terror. The soldiers who arrested Jesus tried to seize this young man, but when they grabbed for him, the simple linen cloth he wore came away in their hands. So the anonymous young man ran naked into the night.

Some Bible scholars suggest that this young man was none other than Mark, the author of this gospel. Perhaps, because of his fascination with Jesus, he had been hanging around the fringes of the Lord's disciples, hoping to learn more. The fact that Mark is the only gospel writer who records this incident suggests that the young man may well have been Mark.

Another fascinating story, found in Mark 10:17-22, is also recorded in Matthew and Luke—the story of the rich young ruler. It is the story of a young man who, not long before Jesus was crucified, came to Him with a question. He was a wealthy member of the ruling class, an aristocratic young man of culture and refinement. He went up to Jesus, knelt at His feet, and said, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“Why do you call me good?” replied Jesus. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”

“Teacher,” the young ruler answered, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

Then Mark records something that neither of the other accounts tells us: “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” That personal note, together with the fact that Mark's mother was a wealthy woman with a large house in Jerusalem, suggests to me that Mark may have been that rich young ruler. If this is so, then perhaps the story of the young man who followed Jesus but fled without his clothes is Mark's way of telling us that the rich young ruler reconsidered what Jesus told him and ended up following the Lord. The Scriptures do not explicitly say so, but I strongly suspect it is true.

The Two Halves of Mark

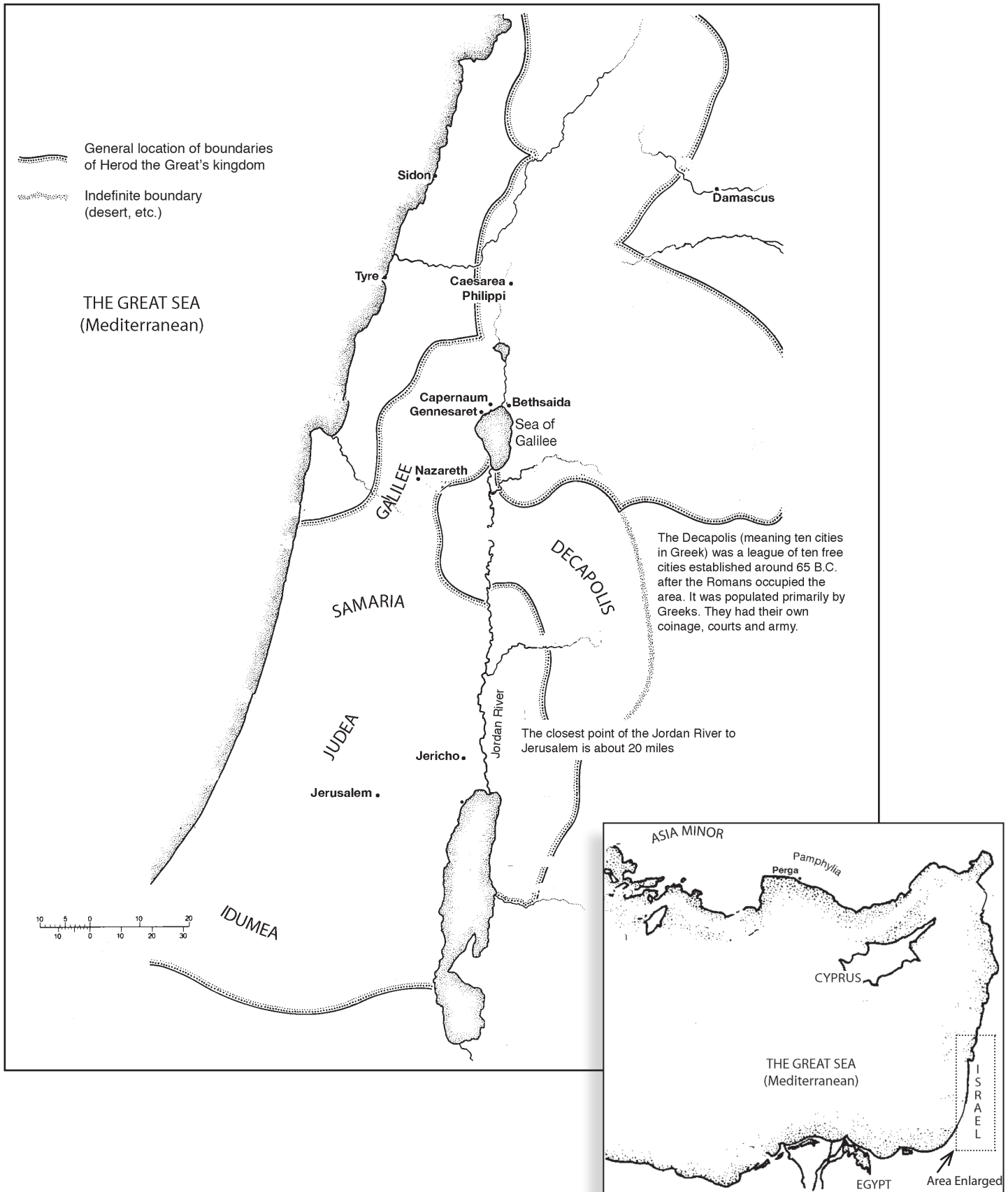
If my speculation is correct—if the author of the gospel of Mark is personally connected with the events he recorded—then that would explain a great deal. For example, it would explain Mark's apparent fascination with two qualities of Jesus that he presents to us in the first verse: “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

This is a profound statement. Jesus of Nazareth—the human Jesus, the carpenter—is also the Son of God. The fact that Jesus is man and God made a strong impression on Mark. In fact, the book, organized according to these two qualities of Jesus, easily divides into two halves.

Part 1 of the gospel of Mark consists of Mark 1:1–8:26. The theme of part 1 is “The Servant Who Rules,” and that section deals with Jesus, the Servant who has all authority in heaven and earth.

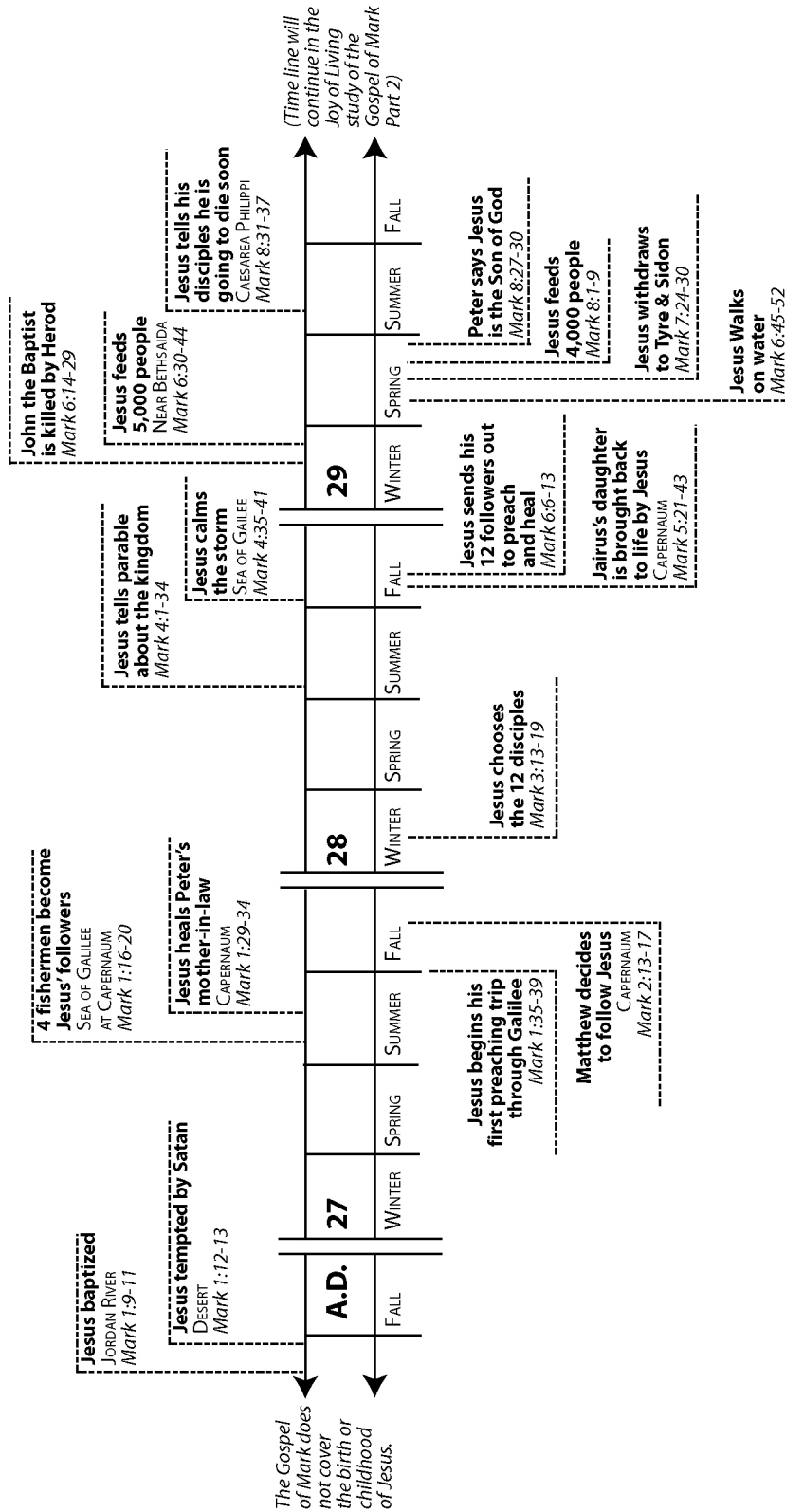
The theme of part 2, Mark 8:27–16:20, is “The Ruler Who Serves,” and that part deals with the servant attitude of the Son of God, the rightful Ruler who comes to suffer and die for our sakes.

Where the Gospel of Mark Took Place



When the Events Recorded in the Gospel of Mark Took Place

Dotted lines leading to the time line are meant to define sequence of events only. Exact dates, even year dates, are generally unknown.



Unlike the other Gospels, Mark's Gospel was written primarily for Roman readers. To them legal genealogies and fulfillments of prophecy would be of no importance. The Roman would be interested in what Jesus did. Thus Mark does not include many events, prophetic fulfillments and teachings recorded in the other Gospels.

Only events recorded in the Gospel of Mark are included on this time line. For a more extensive time line you may want to purchase a copy of **Reproducible Maps, Charts, Time Lines & Illustrations** (Regal Books ©1989).

Study Questions

Before you begin each day:

- ☞ 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 Introduction to Mark.

1. What meaningful or new thought did you find in the Introduction to Mark, or from your teacher’s lecture? What personal application did you choose to apply to your life?

2. Look for a verse in the lesson to memorize this week. Write it down, carry it with you, tack it to your bulletin board, on the dashboard of your car, etc. Make a real effort to learn the verse and its “address” (reference of where it is found in the Bible).

Second Day: Read Mark 1:1-8, concentrating on verses 1-3.

1. “Gospel” is from the Old English *godspel* or “good news.”¹ From Mark 1:1, who is this “good news” about?

2. How did Mark say the public announcement of this good news was foretold in the Old Testament? (Mark 1:2-3)

3. In these verses Mark quoted two Old Testament prophets, Malachi and Isaiah, although he only names the major prophet, Isaiah. He wanted to stress what Isaiah said because what Malachi wrote agrees with it. Mark’s gospel was written over 400 years after the book of Malachi and about 700 years after the book of Isaiah, yet after that long passage of time these prophecies are finally being fulfilled. Read the original prophecies in Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3. Who will send the messenger, according to Malachi?

4. a. How does Mark describe the messenger in Mark 1:3a?

 b. What specifically was the messenger to do and for whom was he to do it? (Mark 1:3b)

5. In ancient times, before a king made a journey to a distant country, the roads he would travel were improved. Similarly, preparation for the Messiah was made in a moral and spiritual way that focused on repentance and forgiveness of sin and the need for a Savior.² Read Malachi 3:1 again. What will happen after the messenger prepares the way?

1. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd edition.

2. Kenneth Barker, editor, *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985). Note on Luke 3:4.

6. Personal: Malachi describes the Lord as “the Lord you are seeking...whom you desire.” Does this describe how you feel about the Lord? Do you desire Him? Are you seeking Him? What promise does He give to you in Jeremiah 29:13?

Third Day: Review Mark 1:1-8, concentrating on verse 4.

1. In fulfillment of the prophecies, where did John preach his message? (Mark 1:4a)

2. What action did John say people should take? (Mark 1:4b) Note: John’s practice of baptizing those who came to him in repentance was so characteristic of his ministry that he became known as “the Baptist” or “the Baptizer.”¹

3. What hope did John extend to those who heard and acted upon his message? (Mark 1:4c)

4. The Merriam-Webster Online dictionary defines repentance as, “To feel regret or contrition,” or, “To change one’s mind.” Most of us realize that we are not perfect and fall short of our own standards, but rarely do we translate that into being a “sinner.” Read Romans 3:23. How many of us are sinners in need of repentance?

5. Personal: As you can see, we all fall into the category of “sinner needing to repent”. Have you come to hate your sin? Do you want to stop going your own way and start going God’s way? If so, you have repented. Now simply put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ to take away your sin. What promise does God give you in 1 John 1:9?

Fourth Day: Review Mark 1:1-8, concentrating on verse 5.

1. Who went to hear John’s message? (Mark 1:5a)

2. Where exactly was John baptizing?

3. Find these places on the map on page 7. About how far did these people have to travel to hear John’s message?

4. Challenge: It had been about 400 years since the final book in the Old Testament, Malachi, had been written. Why do you think people were willing to travel so far to hear John preach?

1. The NIV Study Bible. Note on Mark 1:4.

5. Personal: Are you willing to be a voice for God calling out to people in this wilderness of a world we live in, telling them to turn to God and offering the hope of forgiveness of sin? Will you ask God to give you opportunities to share His good news with others?

Sixth Day: Review Mark 1:1-8, concentrating on verses 7-8.

1. a. How did John describe the One who would come after him? (Mark 1:7)

b. What did John say this coming One would do? (Mark 1:8)

2. a. Read John 1:29-34. How did John recognize this One who was coming after him? (John 1:32-33)

b. What did John say when he saw Jesus? (John 1:29)

c. What did John testify about Jesus? (John 1:34)

3. We have learned that all people are sinners. What does Romans 6:23 say is the penalty for our sin?

4. a. What do Leviticus 17:11 and Hebrews 9:22 say regarding sin?

b. What does Hebrews 10:4 say regarding the blood of animal sacrifices?

5. The blood of the animal sacrifices merely covered sin. According to John 1:29 and 1 John 1:7, what does the blood of Jesus Christ do?

6. Personal: When Jesus Christ died on the cross He made a way to have our sin forgiven and removed. Have you had your sin removed by faith in the blood of Jesus Christ? Write Colossians 1:14 inserting your name.