

Jason Upchurch - Mark 1 - Intro

We are diving into the gospel of Mark this morning and I am excited to begin this study. Since RBC started we have looked at a fair amount of the Bible but we have not yet spent a significant amount of time in the gospels. And part of my motivation for preaching through Mark is that we will see Jesus face to face.

There's a reason that there are 4 gospels. Four accounts of the supernatural birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And that is because as God in the flesh, our Savior and Redeemer, he is the center of our worship.

What we have in the gospels is more than just a historical account of Jesus. The gospels are a type of literary genre in ancient times called bios. Which is kind of like a biography that we might read now, but it's a biography that centers around a central figure who is to be praised and emulated. It gives record of some of what they said, some of how they acted - but it does so that we would praise that person as amazing and also emulate what they are doing.

And that's what I really want you to walk away with this morning. But if we want to know Mark in depth, it's good for us to have some background information.

So my plan for this morning is to do some background work and then walk through the whole gospel together with you. We're going to read a fair amount of Scripture but I hope it drives home why we're here in this gospel. So let's start with some background.

1) Mark is what is often called a synoptic gospel. Matthew, Mark and Luke are the 3 synoptic gospels. Syn - meaning together, optic - meaning to view. And what that means in simple terms is that Matthew, Mark and Luke are very similar to each other. If you've ever read them one right after another, you've probably noticed that Matthew, Mark and Luke share many of the same stories. In fact, Mark and Matthew and Luke share about 90% of the same information: same stories, same miracles, same parables.

Whereas those 3 gospels overlap a lot, John's gospel has 90% unique information to itself. John has no parables, it has 71 sayings, miracles and events are recorded that the other 3 didn't.

That shouldn't alarm us in any way. There's so much about Jesus that John even says you couldn't record all Jesus did and said in all the books in all the world.

The point is this: The gospels are not exhaustive, they were never meant to be. They hit the major highlights in a brief fashion.

2) The gospels are also not always in chronological order. For the most part they move chronologically, but not always. Especially in Matthew's gospel, he often puts similar events together disregarding a strict timeline or the strict order. And you say "Wait a minute!?! That means the Bible contradicts itself!" The answer is: no it doesn't.

The gospel writers are not writing an exhaustive biographical volume on the precise life of Jesus. That's not their goal. They arrange the order of the stories and information to suit their purposes.

Matthew arranges his gospel so that Jesus's life somewhat mirrors the history of Israel. Jesus is the New Israel - we find that out in the opening chapter.

Luke is probably the most chronologically precise and written for a gentile audience who might not be familiar with Jewish customs and laws and traditions.

But Mark often strings stories together that match a particular theme. Or he'll start with a story, interject another story, and then come back to the original story. He does this for emphasis.

By the way, why 4 gospels? Because they are bearing witness to the greatest person to ever live: Jesus the Son of God, who is the promised Messiah that God foretold and planned from before the time of Adam in the Garden.

Although there is overlap, each gospel gives a unique contribution to not what Jesus did and said, but also in how they tell the story.

3) This is more “gee-whiz” information, but over the last couple of decades most scholars believe Mark wrote his gospel first. His gospel is shorter than the other gospels, but when Mark tells a story he usually adds more detail than Matthew or Luke. For the most part, you can line up a story that’s told in Mark and Luke and the one in Mark will be longer. Same with Matthew. Mark usually adds more information than the other two.

And so the theory goes that Mark wrote first, Matthew and Luke probably referenced Mark and abbreviated some of his stories so that they could add other stories.

In ancient times this type of short biography was called a bioi.

Mark Straus: “These bioi were generally written to preserve the memory and/or celebrate the exploits, virtues, or teachings of famous rulers, philosophers, or statesmen.”

And that’s what we have here with Mark. His is the first gospel to give us a biographical sketch of Jesus. This is not exhaustive, it’s not meant to be. It’s meant simply to show us the amazing character of our Lord, highlighting his teaching and works and of course his death and resurrection that we might believe.

Here’s one caution I will give you. It’s called gospel harmonization. Gospel harmonizations are when people try to piece together the precise order of events taking snippets from one gospel and another and another and figure out what really happened.

Now, there’s nothing sinful about gospel harmonizations. We’ll likely do that a lot as we study this gospel. I have gospel harmony books, and if you have a study Bible it’ll probably have a harmonization somewhere.

What’s the danger? The danger is that rather than simply focusing on the story Mark is trying to tell us - or Matthew or Luke or John - our mission is to figure out “what really happened.” The danger is that we actually mistrust the gospel and trust our own attempts to piece a story together.

Because, again that’s not the point. The point is to see Jesus is to listen to the story of Jesus as told by each author, with their emphasis.

4) Last: who is Mark? Who is this guy we keep talking about? Well, unlike Peter and Paul in their letters, the gospel writers didn’t send identify who they were. They didn’t sign their name at the end.

We know that this was Mark largely from the writings of faithful people who lived just shortly after Jesus.

Mark Straus: Earliest report is from Eusebius:

“The Presbyter [apostle John] used to say this also: “Mark became Peter’s interpreter and wrote down accurately, but not in order, all that he remembered of the things said and done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord or been one of his followers, but later, as I said, a follower of Peter. Peter used to teach as the occasion demanded, without giving systematic arrangement to the Lord’s sayings, so that Mark did not err in writing down some things just as he recalled them. For he had one overriding purpose: to omit nothing that he had heard and to make no false statements in his account.”

Did you catch that? Basically what we have here, by Mark’s hand is a gospel of stories that he learned from who? Peter. Church history suggests very strongly that this is Peter’s gospel, written down by Mark to preserve Peter’s perspective.

Why does that matter? Because Peter was the chief of the apostles before Paul. He was the inner circle of the inner circle. And Mark, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit recorded them for us.

Here's some more from a letter in the 2nd century (ibid.):

“Mark ... who was called ‘stump-fingered’ because for the size of the rest of his body he had fingers that were too short. He was Peter’s interpreter. After the departure [or ‘death’] of Peter himself, the same man wrote his Gospel in the regions of Italy.”

It’s interesting that a writer of a gospel would be known for being stump-fingered. He had short fat fingers, that’s unusual for a scribe. But it’s a bit of personal detail that would be odd to add if it weren’t true. It’s also odd, because usually that would be offensive to say something like that to someone who wrote holy Scripture. But this author views Mark highly.

The other thing we learn from this quote is that Mark wrote after the death of Peter. Probably in AD 60-65. Peter had died and Mark wanted to make sure the stories that Peter told about Jesus were preserved for us.

Beyond this, we know very little of Mark. He probably referenced in **Mark 14:51-52**. Why do people think this is Mark? Well, to be honest it’s an unusual insertion in the middle of the passion narrative - the description of Jesus’s arrest and suffering.

Why add it? It appears it was added because Mark is giving a nod that he did see Jesus. He was an eyewitness of some of the life of our Lord. It’s anonymous but a detail that only a few would know, and it doesn’t appear to be something one of the 12 disciples did.

What else do we know about Mark? We know he went on a missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas but decided to go home in the middle of the journey. We don’t know why he went home, but it was a contentious enough reason for Paul and Barnabas to go their separate ways on the next missionary journey. But we also know at the end of Paul’s life, he refers to Mark as being very useful to him,

Our brother Mark was used by God to be an encouragement to the entire church of Jesus, not only by planting churches, recording the life of Jesus, but also by showing us just how awesome Jesus was.

And I want our brother Mark to encourage us, this morning by pulling out one particular theme we see in his gospel over and over: that Jesus is just awesome. It’s easy to become ho-hum in our view of Jesus, despite knowing he is that amazing Son of God. Mark doesn’t let us do that.

One of his main themes is showing us just how amazing our Lord is. Take a look at how pervasive this theme is.

Read 1:26-28, 35-37, 45; 2:1-2, 12; 3:20-21; 4:35-41; 5:19-20; 39-43

Amazement - ecstasie. It’s a profound emotional experience to the point of being outside oneself (BDAG). Where we get our word “ecstasy.” It was megas ekstasie - great amazement.

People marvel at Jesus. But Jesus also marvels - and sometimes not in a good way. **Read 6:1-6**

If Jesus marvels at you it’s either a really good thing or a really bad thing. He’s either marveling at your lack of faith or your profoundly great faith. Here he marvels that these people don’t believe.

He could only heal a few people, he cast out no demons. Then Mark turns back to the theme of amazement.

Read 6:45-52; 7:31-37; 10:23-32; 11:12-21; 12:15-17; 15:1-5; 15:33-39; 16:1-8

The gospel of Mark is a record of just how absolutely amazing Jesus was and is.

Can I ask you a question? Have you grown bored of Jesus? Is Jesus unimpressive to you? Do you know all the stories, all the teachings, all the miracles and it’s no-big deal anymore?

Can I be honest? That happens to me. Familiarity breeds contempt. And we can be in the faith so long that the amazing and awesome power of our Savior becomes ho-hum.

Mark knows this, God knows this. And that's why he's written down for us the amazing works of Jesus - so that our hearts might be rekindled again to love and worship and stand in awe of the Son of God.

I pray that our study through Mark rekindles in you a love and awe of Jesus.

Pray