

A Brief Reflection on the Gospel According to Mark

Because this book is short, my guess is that most of my readers have read it at least a few times. But have we read it theologically and canonically? That's how we ought to read narrative Scripture, thinking about what's between the lines. Its simple, straight-forward style is deceptive, because beneath the surface of the text is deep theology and meaning. Thus, for example, this book is fast-paced, but why? It lacks the birth narrative. Why? It has an abrupt beginning and an even more abrupt ending. Why is that? Let's think about Mark.

The opening line is strange: "The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ." Does "beginning" merely refer to this narrative unfolding first with John the Baptist, or is there more to this ambiguous statement? I suspect Mark chose this opening to imply that there's more to the gospel than just what's in his text. He wants us to think carefully about exactly what the gospel is. The opening verses are a quote from the O.T. prophets, "It is written . . . " Why? Just to introduce John? Or, because God had promised in the Hebrew Scriptures that He himself would enter into His creation. So the gospel is really not only everything about Jesus, who He is, what He did, what He taught, and the meaning to it that's given later in the apostolic writings, but about God's great creational intentions, His purposes and His desire for His beloved human creatures and His cosmos.

If the opening is abrupt, what about Mark's curious ending? Let's think about that here. I suspect that Mark wants us to understand that we, followers of Jesus in the era subsequent to His resurrection (the church age) are to complete this work, the unfolding of the gospel. Mark is really all about discipleship. And we're disciples making disciples.

Jesus' ministry was serving God (10:45). So Mark's narrative is fast-moving and packed with instances of Jesus serving people with needs. Forty-two times, Mark writes, "immediately" to impart the impression of an active, obedient servant at work. There are 18 miracles recorded, several already in the first chapter. It's why there's no birth narrative. He's busy working.

Also in the first chapter we're told repeatedly that Jesus "taught." That's because He's the one promised in Deuteronomy 18:15ff, the ultimate Prophet whom the people must obey. And in this chapter is the first of several exorcisms. Jesus has come to deliver God's creation from its bondage to evil. That's why in Chapter 1 there's a reference to "sunset" (v.32) and in the last chapter of Mark (v. 2), a "sunrise." Mark mentions that it's dark out eight times. With the resurrection, night is over. We're now in the full light of day, a *new* day. God's creational purpose of defeating evil is fulfilled in the Person and work of the Son who condescended to enter the physical creation, suffer humiliation, and then conquer so that only good, God's good, remains.

All thru Mark there are allusions to resurrection. They're subtle, but they're there. Thus, in 2:11,12, "I tell you, rise . . ." He rose, took his mat and walked out." Again in 2:31, "He took her hand and raised her." And in 5:41, "I say to you, rise!" And again in Chapter 6 there twice are references to resurrection from the dead (vv. 14 and 16). The word "rise" occurs again in 14:42. The resurrection of Jesus is uniquely anticipated throughout Mark because it's key to understanding the gospel.

Mark only records a few of Jesus' parables. The Parable of the Soils in Chapter 4 is deeply instructive. Three times Jesus began and ended by saying the word, *sh'mah*. That's the first word of Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one." That means this parable has to do with the critically important Chapter 6 of Deuteronomy. This parable, then, is a midrash (a rabbinic exposition) on "heart," "soul," and "might." The "soils" represent types of love for God. The Kingdom Jesus is offering is based on Israel's great confession of love for God!

The healing of the demon-possessed man in Chapter 5 is exceedingly important, although it's also subtle in the extreme. The demons begged Jesus for permission to enter a herd of pigs, and Jesus did that. The demon-possessed pigs then ran into the sea. What we have here is a reverse type, or a reprise of something that happened back in Genesis Chapters 10-11. That anti-type is the Most High God sending wicked supernatural created beings to the 70 Gentile nations at the rebellion at the Tower of Babel to govern and control them. Those Gentile nations comprise what is called in the writing prophets "the sea" because of their incessant turbulence.

So, Jesus is here identified either as (or having the authority of) the Most High God, the Creator, the God of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus has ultimate control of all evil spirits, indeed, of the nations of the world.

There are three boat scenes involving the disciples. In the first (4:41), the disciples ask, "Who is this?" This is a key verse in Mark: readers must answer for themselves, Who is this amazing Person, Jesus? These boat scenes climax with the third (8:14-21), in which the perplexed, still uncomprehending disciples disastrously incur a harsh rebuke from Jesus, "Are your hearts hardened?" All through Mark, the disciples are only slowly understanding who Jesus is. Thus the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida in 8:22-26 occurs in stages. The disciples only gradually comprehend, just as all Israel will only gradually comprehend who this Person is. Even up to the very end of Mark, there is no comprehension of who Jesus is and what He's doing. The three women who saw that Jesus had risen from the dead are terrified as well as bewildered, and they flee the site.

Let's get this key lesson from Mark. Discipleship is progressive. For us as well as the Twelve. We gradually increasingly get to know Jesus and are progressively transformed. But discipleship is inherently necessary for anyone who would follow Jesus.

Why so many paradoxical sayings (clean is unclean, the first is last, the blind see but those who see are blind, children have great status not the disciples, and more)? Because God's values and will are so exceedingly different from ours, and it's God's entire worldview that we're responsible for. It's not that there's mystery about God, but that we're so obtuse! Why so many healings and exorcisms and miracles of nature? Because, although we don't recognize it, we're totally dependent on God just for our existence. If not for the loving and good interventions of God, we'd not even exist! And why the cross? Because we're totally dependent on God not to condemn us as we deserve for our sins, failures, rebellions and just plain moral ugliness. And if, by grace, we do come to understand these things, how deep and life-changing should our love and gratitude to God be! And how do we relate to God? By humbly loving and serving the Son, who came to reveal Him.

In chapter 6, the Israelite crowd recognizes Jesus, physically. Not who He is, though, because at the end of Mark the crowd screams, "Crucify Him!" Peter does correctly identify Him as Israel's promised Messiah, yet he doesn't know what that means and, worse, it doesn't seem to affect him. All thru the book there's not only uncomprehending who Jesus is, but conflict, serious mortal conflict. The Jewish leaders hate Him and want Him out of the way without even knowing who He is; the Roman leader doesn't know who Jesus is and is indifferent (which morally is the same as hate); and the crowd . . . well, they're glad for the healings but otherwise aren't interested in Him and don't care who He is or if He's dead. But all thru the narrative, scattered here and there, are (few) individuals, a leper, a blind man, a woman who's hemorrhaging, for example, who do seem to know who He is and respond appropriately with faith. The book ends with a centurion (ironically a Gentile) who, having had only minimal exposure to Jesus by witnessing His unique death, correctly identifies Him.

Mark is a microcosm, a cameo, of our world of humanity! The disciples will understand who Jesus is and what He did later, after the resurrection, after the Holy Spirit radically changes them and reveals truth to them. The Son came to an entire race of sinful human creatures that must be totally transformed. Otherwise they're either openly hostile to God, fearful, or hard-hearted. And so no relationships are even possible.

There's much more in Mark, but let's stop here. If we read between the lines, we understand the glory that is the Son's. He came to restore creation, to dispose of all evil, and to rescue a fallen humanity. He rose from death, thus defeating it (for us, death is transition to a different existence), and so He lives today to come again. Jesus is the greatest reality that there is. And He's called us into the most privileged of all conceivable relationships: to know Him, the eternal God, to be with Him, and so to be like Him and to serve Him in love and gratitude. It's a progressive relationship that grows and deepens because He loves us and seeks to bless us in ways too wonderful for us even to imagine. Let us respond to this revelation in the only appropriate way, with supernaturally deep love and a radically changed life.