

Chapter Summary: Mark

In the mid-60s AD, the Roman Emperor Nero began a severe persecution of Jesus' followers. During that time, the apostles Paul and Peter were imprisoned and executed. The apostle Peter had been one of Jesus' closest companions.

According to church tradition, Mark had become a close companion of Peter, who then passed along to Mark his recollections of Jesus' life and teachings. Mark compiled the story of Jesus in a succinct Gospel, which inspired an already-embattled generation of Jesus' followers to remain faithful. After all, Jesus Himself had said, "If any of you wants to be My follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross, and follow Me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for My sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will save it."

Mark's use of Latin terms suggests that his Gospel was written primarily for Romans and other Gentiles in the empire. He also explains Jewish customs and translates Aramaic phrases, indicating that his audience isn't familiar with the culture and language of the land where Jesus had lived.

Mark uses Peter's accounts to shape the traditions about Jesus that were already being passed down by word of mouth. He announces right at the start of his Gospel that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of God." Mark's main themes are the identity of Jesus and the surprising way this "Son of God" is bringing God's rule into the world.

Mark shows how various groups – crowds of Jewish people, the teachers of religious law, Jesus' family, and even Jesus' own disciples – struggled to understand who Jesus was. Jesus even told people not to talk to others about Him. Everyone could see that Jesus had great powers of healing and deliverance, but His actions did not fit first-century Jewish expectations for the Messiah.

Mark tells the story with urgency, like a fast-paced drama: Jesus moves quickly from village to village, preaching and healing. The heart of Jesus' message is the coming of God's Kingdom. But Rome has its own version of the "Good News," claiming that Caesar is the son of God and that peace and security come through him. By contrast, the ministry of Jesus centers on the restoration of God's people, announcing the forgiveness of sins and releasing people from illness and spiritual oppression.

As the first half of Mark's Gospel progresses, Jesus spends more time teaching His disciples in private. It is especially important to Him that they understand who He is and what His message means. Right at the midpoint of the book, as Jesus is about to end His ministry in Galilee and journey south to Jerusalem, Peter finally declares, "You are the Messiah." But Peter and the other disciples still do not recognize what kind of Messiah Jesus is. Jesus isn't preparing an army to fight the Romans; His battle is against evil at a deeper level, and it will be won by following the way of the cross.

From that point onward, Jesus repeatedly informs His disciples that He will suffer, be killed, and rise from the dead. Furthermore, He teaches them that this path of suffering and service for others will be their path too. This is a hard adjustment of expectations for them, as evidenced by their fleeing when Jesus is arrested. Ironically, the Roman officer in charge of Jesus' execution recognizes who He is from the way he dies, exclaiming, "This man truly was the Son of God!" This officer serves as a model for the Roman believers to whom Mark was writing.

There are some historical questions about how Mark concluded his story. But regardless of the possible endings, the message of Jesus' resurrection is clear: Jesus really is the Messiah, and God vindicated His unexpected path of servanthood and sacrifice by raising Him from the dead. Knowing this should inspire the believers in Rome to fulfill their roles in sharing the story of Jesus: "For the Good News must first be preached to all nations."