

RELIGION

Scripture of the Week

Romans 2:1-4

Insight on the Word: The Beginning of the Good News: The Gospel of Mark

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The Bible text for next week's Sunday School lesson in March 1:1-15.

Beginning with this lesson, our Sunday Schools will be studying through eight weeks on the Gospel according to Mark. Naturally we will only be hitting the high points of the book, but I believe the eight texts chosen by the International Committee do give an accurate summary of the whole book, and help us grasp its contents. Most importantly, these lessons remind us of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, culminating in his death and resurrection, which we will be studying around Resurrection Sunday ("Easter").

So this is a perfect time to recall some basic information about the Gospel of Mark; things that will help us understand more about the work of Jesus Christ, and appreciate this Gospel all the more. I encourage any Christian who really wants to grow in his spiritual walk this year to read through the whole Gospel of Mark between now and April 19. Let the Lord reveal himself to you in the Word.

What is a "Gospel"? The word we translate *gospel* means a message of good news, like the announcement of a military victory or the birth of a king's first son. The four books we call "Gospels" (note the capital G for book titles) are all messages about the good news of the coming of Jesus Christ, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God March 1:14-15. The Gospels may have elements of history or biography, but they are primarily announcements of the person of the strong Son of God. So many things you would expect to find in a biography of Jesus simply are not found in the Gospel according to Mark.

Who is Mark? The Gospel itself does not identify its author, but the early church leaders unanimously agreed he was John Mark, first named in Acts 12:12 as a cousin of Barnabas. He was a helper of Paul at various points of his evangelistic journeys (Acts

13:5; 15:37; Col. 4:10; 2 Tim. 4:11). Later he was a beloved associate of the Apostle Peter, apparently when they were both in Rome (1 Pet. 5:13).

How and where did he write? According to a respected church father, Papias, John Mark took down the preached accounts of Peter and wove them into a powerful testimony of the "good news" of Jesus Christ. Others concur that Mark was very close to Peter at the end of his life, and that the Gospel reflects Peter's eyewitness accounts.

This would mean that Mark wrote first of all to the church in Rome. This is confirmed by the mention of Simon of Cyrene, and his sons Alexander and Rufus (Mark 15:21), for we know that Rufus and his mother lived in Rome (Rom. 16:13). This would explain why there are a lot of Latin terms used in this Gospel, more than in the other Gospels. And yet, there are also more Aramaic terms (the spoken language of the apostles) in Mark than in the other Gospels, reflecting the background and style of Peter, Mark's main source.

When and why did he write this Gospel? Our general knowledge of history in the first century would lead us to put Peter's death around A.D. 65-70, in Rome, in the middle of a great persecution started by the Emperor Nero. Very likely John Mark completed this Gospel about the same time.

The disciples of Jesus Christ were in the midst of crisis. The Roman authorities were imprisoning them, torturing them to uncover others, and killing many in public display and ridicule. Within their circle, the disciples heard many saying that the Christ was not truly a man, and did not really experience the sufferings of the cross.

Mark recorded the "good news" for these troubled disciples, that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did undergo all the persecution, betrayal rejection and death that they faced--and that he faced it faithfully to the end and overcame all his enemies by the resurrection. The

Christ did not "cop out" as a spirit, leaving Jesus to suffer as a man, alone. Jesus was and is the Christ.

What makes this Gospel special? Several things could be noted.

(1) The death of Christ, and the events which lead up to it, take up over 40% of the book much more than Matthew or Luke. On the other hand, he doesn't even mention Jesus' birth, family, or upbringing--until his baptism by John in the Jordan.

(2) The actions of Jesus are emphasized far more than his words, and Mark often gives more vivid (eyewitness) details in his accounts than the others do. His writing style is rough, often with poor Greek grammar, but quite understandable if he was recording spoken messages and remembrances.

(3) The presence of great crowds as Jesus taught, especially in Galilee, is noted continually in chapters 1 to 10, and yet Mark also emphasizes Jesus' concern for secrecy, in the face of these multitudes, so that his message and purpose would not be misunderstood (1:44).

(4) The very word "gospel" Mark emphasizes in his writing, as the title of his work (1:1), as the essence of Jesus' preaching (1:14-15), as worthy of the disciples' sacrifice (8:35; 10:29), and as the message to proclaim to all people (13:10; 14:9).

Why does Mark begin with John the Baptist? Because John was the one who prepared the way for the Lord (1:3; quoting Isaiah 40:3), in the Person of Jesus Christ. Mark was very selective in his opening words here. He did not tell us anything about John's ethical preaching, his condemnation of the religious leaders, or his attack on King Herod which led to his imprisonment (see Matt. 3; 11; Luke 3).

Mark does tell that John proclaimed the impending arrival of the long-awaited Christ. John's baptism is a sign of repentance, and of their faith that God would "remit" or forgive their

sins (Mark 1:4-5), but his message emphasized the coming Messiah. People naturally expected that this meant that the Day of the Lord, the judgment day, was at hand, and they were eager to get ready for the Lord.

Why did Jesus receive a baptism from John? Unlike the others, Jesus was not demonstrating his repentance, nor confessing his sins. (John's reluctance to baptize him is noted in Matt. 3:14-15.) Mark again keeps this episode very brief and pointed: the baptism was an occasion for Jesus to show his commitment to God's plan for his life, and "straightway" (usually translated "immediately" in KJV) the Father gives a public testimony to John and the others around.

"Thou art my beloved Son": The Father gave his official recognition of Jesus' Sonship, as a man would publicly declare his heir. "In whom I am well pleased": The Father further acknowledged his love for his Son, and his endorsement of the work which Jesus would be doing on earth.

Who is this Jesus? That is the key question of the Gospel of Mark, and the key issue of all life. The world is trying to make Jesus a good example, a wonderful teacher, a New Age guru, an Islamic prophet, or any number of other things. And that's nothing new; people in Mark's day were trying to confuse the same issue in many similar ways. But Mark cuts through all the hype, and emphasizes the simple truth: "Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

The Jews and Palestinians who heard Jesus' teachings had no doubt that Jesus claimed to be the divine Son in human form. The Romans knew he meant he was equal in authority with God the Father. Now what about us? Are you willing to confess him as Lord and God, and to give your life to follow in his steps, even when they are painful? As we study Mark, he will continually confront us with Jesus' claims on our lives. I urge you to make up your mind about Jesus today.

1500 Expected at Church Leadership Breakfast

A diversity of color will be an apparent feature of what will be one of the largest multi-cultural religious events since the black/white "Reconciliation Sunday" which occurred last March at the Portland Convention Center.

On Sunday, February 29, at 8:30 am, a leadership breakfast at Maranatha Church, 4222 NE 12th Avenue, will bring together an estimated 1500 church pastors and lay leaders representing different cultural groups and churches. The breakfast is part of preparations for the Pacific Northwest Billy Graham Crusade scheduled for September 23-27 at the Civic Stadium in Portland.

Breakfast will be served at 8:30 am followed by a program of singing, praise, prayer and a message by Dr. Steve Lawson, Senior Pastor of The Bible Church of Little Rock, Arkansas.

Dr. Lawson's church has experienced 15-23% growth each year since being involved in the 1989 Arkansas Crusade. He will encourage those local churches present to maximize the benefits of involvement in the Crusade here.

Reverend Sammy, Staff member at predominantly black Maranatha Church, says having this event at their facility will send a strong message to black religious leaders that pastors city-wide want to get together. "I believe that may time you have a cooperative effort in ministry, the Lord chooses to bless it," Reverend Sammy says.

Church leaders interested in attending the complimentary continental breakfast should make reservations with the Pacific Northwest Billy Graham Crusade office at (503)232-4992.

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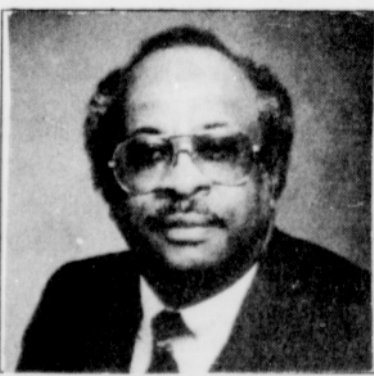
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