

Question: Can you tell me about the Gospel of Mark?

Answer: The Gospel of Mark has long been shunned by those writing and doing commentaries on the gospels as “the other gospel” neatly packed away (and sometimes forgotten) between what some consider the more important gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. From early church history, the Gospel of Mark has been seen as the least among gospels because of its terse language, sudden shift in scenes, and sparse descriptions and content. St. Augustine, a church doctor and 4-5th century theologian stated that Mark was just a follower of Matthew, taking Matthew’s ideas and making them his own (*Sacra Pagina: Mark*, 3). This understanding of Mark held its place widely in the church until the 19th century.

A transition in the way scholarship on Biblical texts was done, led some to believe that Mark was not a copyist of the larger and better known gospels of Matthew and Luke, but instead, the origin of source material for them. The majority of modern scholars are in agreement that the Gospel of Mark was the first of the canonical gospels written. Most date the Mark to have been written sometime between 60-70 AD, before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. Exact authorship of the gospel is unknown but through tradition, and by title, it has been attributed to a man named Mark. Many scholars believe that Mark was writing to an audience in the city of Rome where he lived.

Mark’s gospel would have been circulating throughout the Roman world in the mid 60’s and 70’s. On a scroll, the document would have been read by a single individual to large groups of people. The gospel in its entirety would have been read to the crowds, proclaiming to all who listen the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark’s gospel is a narrative, and is constructed in a very intricate way so that as the gospel progresses, certain themes and ideas continue to build upon each other.

The gospel opens with the proclamation, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). Mark’s task through the rest of the narrative is to articulate the evidence that supports this statement. The first scene of the gospel has John the Baptist baptizing Jesus in the Jordan River, “On coming up out of the water he (Jesus) saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending into him. And a voice came from the heavens, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Mark 1:10-11). According to Mark, at this moment Jesus receives God’s Spirit. *Every* event that unfolds in the narrative after Jesus’ baptism is a direct result of God’s Spirit descending into him. In the next scene, Jesus is driven into the desert by the Spirit and is tempted by Satan for forty days (Mark 1:13). After the forty days, Jesus emerges from the desert, victorious over the power of Satan and proclaims, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). By God’s blessing and Spirit at his baptism, Jesus has been given the *authority* and *responsibility* to proclaim the Kingdom of God. By God’s will, Jesus can now call disciples to him (Mark 1:16-20), cast out demons (Mark 1:21-28), and forgive sins (Mark 2:10).

By God’s will and authority, Jesus proclaims the Kingdom of God. Through his teaching and miracles, Jesus is conscious of this fact and is adamant about doing things not because he wants to do them, but because they are by his Father’s will. Commissioned by his Father at his baptism, Jesus is then publicly proclaimed as God’s Son at the transfiguration. In this way the story affirms and reaffirms that Jesus is doing God’s will, “Then a cloud came, casting a shadow over them; then from the cloud came a voice, “This is my beloved Son. Listen to him” (Mark 9:7)

Doing God’s will is ultimately why Jesus goes to the cross, “The Son of Man *must* suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days” (Mark 8:31). Many who read Mark’s gospel struggle with the notion that God willed the suffering and dying of his only Beloved Son. Yet, those who say this are missing what Mark is really saying. Jesus does not tell us that he must suffer and die; he tells us that he must suffer, die and *rise*, a very distinct and crucial difference from just suffering and dying.

Even though Jesus tells his disciples that he must suffer, die, and rise, carrying out this mission is not easy. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays to his Father. Unlike other passages in the gospel that mention prayer, we are privileged to hear the content of this one. Jesus prays, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will” (Mark 14:36). Up to this point in the gospel, Jesus has preached confidently three times that he will suffer, die, and rise (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33). Yet, at the moment when these events are to actually take place, Jesus seeks renewed confidence in his mission. He says, “but not what I will but what you will.” By saying this, Jesus seems to speak of a will contrary to that of his Father’s, one that he perhaps hopes will not include suffering and dying. Ultimately, as the Beloved Son of God, Jesus puts his own will aside and submits fully to his Father’s. This is no easy task, and he readily admits to his disciples that, “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38). At the end of the gospel we are told what happens to Jesus and why faith in his Father was not in vain. The man clothed in white at the tomb tells the women, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here” (Mark 16:6).