**Practicing Resurrection: The Gospel of Mark and Radical Discipleship**

**Rev. Angela Ford Nelson**

[**www.angelafordnelson@yahoo.com**](http://www.angelafordnelson@yahoo.com)

**864-787-4633**



**Summary**

The Gospel of Mark focuses attention on the last week of Jesus' life and his death in Jerusalem. Frequent appearances of the adverb *immediately* in this Gospel express the urgency of Jesus' journey to the cross. This journey begins at the inauguration of Jesus' ministry, commencing right away with his baptism and testing in the wilderness. As Jesus repeatedly announces his coming suffering, death, and resurrection, the Gospel of Mark draws its readers into the unfolding drama of Jesus' death and resurrection.

**So What?**

The opening words of the Gospel according to Mark, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," are more than a title to the Gospel. They draw the hearer or reader into the entire account, connecting us with the good news itself. Whatever the parable, miracle, teaching, or story from the life and ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, the good news (literally, the gospel) of Jesus Christ breaks into our lives.

**Where Do I Find It?**

The Gospel according to Mark is the second book in the New Testament. It sits between two books that speak about Jesus from a similar perspective, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

**Who Wrote It?**

The specific author whom we call "the evangelist Mark" remains purposefully unknown to us. The evangelist's intention in composing the Gospel is not to draw attention to self, but to Jesus' proclamation of the good news (gospel) in word and deed.

**When Was It Written?**

The Gospel of Mark is considered the earliest written of the four Gospels. It is impossible to determine whether it was put into written form before or after the siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E., but this event is a landmark for situating the time of Mark's composition. Certainly the death of the earliest generation of Christians around this same time also brought an urgency for the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth to be kept alive in written form for succeeding generations.

**What's It About?**

The Gospel of Mark is about the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ, who is identified as one from Nazareth at his baptism, recognized as God's Son by fearful demonic spirits, and proclaimed as the resurrected Lord by a young man in a white robe. In Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, the reign and rule of God's kingdom has come among us.

**How Do I Read It?**

The Gospel expectantly invites its readers with its opening verse. That verse promises that the good news of the living presence of God's reign and rule breaks into our lives through every parable, miracle, teaching, or event in the life of Jesus. The Gospel leads us to the foot of the cross, where we witness the confession of the centurion. The Gospel also leads us to the empty tomb, where we witness the proclamation of the young man. In Mark, Jesus is the crucified and resurrected Christ who promises to go before us into the world with the good news.

**Who Was it Written For?**

The city of Rome is often looked to as the Gospel's provenance. Some suggest that the evangelist's acts of translating Aramaic words into Greek (for example, Mark 7:34; 15:34) offer a clue that the Gospel was written primarily for Gentiles. This would also correlate with a Christian community that was present in Rome during the second half of the first century C.E.

Throughout the Gospel there is a strong sense of the imminence of God's rule and reign breaking in "immediately." The frequent occurrences of this adverb heighten the urgency, suggesting that the parousia (the second coming of Christ) is near. The concluding verses of chapter 13 associate the parousia with Mark's Passion Narrative, which unfolds in the following chapters through the four watches of the night. The periods of time named as the watches in 13:35-37 (and followed there by the command to "keep awake") are all mentioned during Jesus' passion: evening (14:17-31), midnight (14:32-42), cockcrow (14:53-72), and dawn (15:1-20).

**The Themes**

* **Beloved Son.** The voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased" (1:11), ushers readers into the first half of the Gospel. Likewise, the voice from heaven in the transfiguration, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (9:7), ushers them into the second half of the Gospel. The parable of the vineyard (12:1-12) expresses the truth of Jesus' identity as God's beloved Son.
* **Discipleship sayings.** Jesus teaches about discipleship in the context of references to his death and resurrection. Three times Jesus announces his passion and resurrection (8:31; 9:30-31; 10:32-34), and three times the disciples misunderstand (8:32-33; 9:32; 10:35-40). In each instance, Jesus responds to the disciples' misunderstanding by teaching them the way of discipleship.
* **Holy One of God.** The first public act of Jesus' ministry in the Gospel takes place in the synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-28), where a man with an unclean spirit names him as "the Holy One of God." This story sets up the cosmic battle between Jesus and the demonic powers that continues into the Gospel.
* **"I Am."** The name of the Lord God from the burning bush in Exodus 3:14 is the identity that Jesus speaks to his disciples as he approaches them on the Sea of Galilee in Mark 6:50 (NRSV translates the Greek "I am" as "it is I"). The only other time that Mark refers to this identity is when Jesus responds to the high priest in 14:62, a response that the high priest interprets as blasphemy.
* **Messiah/Christ.** When Jesus asks his disciples about his identity, Peter confesses, "You are the Messiah" (8:29). Not until the hearing before the high priest and the question he puts to Jesus is this identity heard again: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" (14:61). The reader of the Gospel knows the answer--that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one of God, the fulfillment of Jewish messianic expectation.
* **Son of David.** This identity and confession of Jesus comes in Mark only on the lips of blind Bartimaeus in the city of Jericho as Jesus travels on his way to Jerusalem, the city of David. Twice Bartimaeus cries out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:47-48).
* **Son of God.** The demons and unclean spirits know Jesus as the Son of God. The only time in Mark that human lips confess Jesus as the Son of God is in the moment following the tearing of the temple curtain (15:39). The evangelist has drawn us to the cross throughout the Gospel where we too are called, in light of the cross, to make our confession of Jesus as the Son of God.
* **Son of Man.** Jesus is the only one who uses this expression, and he uses it to identify himself. It has three meanings: (1) Jesus has authority on earth to forgive sins (2:10), and he is the lord of the Sabbath (2:28); (2) Jesus suffers, is rejected, is handed over for crucifixion, and after three days rises (8:31, 38; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41); (3) Jesus' death will be vindicated, and he will reign as Lord, seated at the right hand of God and coming in the clouds with great power and glory (13:26; 14:62).
* **Son of the Most High God.** This confession comes from a demon-possessed man who lives among tombs (5:7) and encounters Jesus.
* **Temple.** The temple in Jerusalem is the central focus of Mark's final section and Passion Narrative (11:1-15:47). Jesus teaches about the temple's destruction and attending signs of the end when the Son of Man returns (13:3-37).

**The Outline of the Book of Mark**

**I. Beginnings (Mark 1:1-15)**

Mark announces "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ" and introduces John the Baptist. Jesus is baptized, identified as God's beloved Son, and immediately tested in the wilderness by Satan.

**II. Mark's First Section: Jesus' Ministry among Jews and Gentiles (Mark 1:16-8:21)**

This section consists of three cycles of stories about Jesus' ministry in Galilee and surrounding regions. The material in this section highlights the disciples' failure or inability to understand Jesus' miracles, teachings, and parables.

**A. The First Cycle of the First Section (Mark 1:16-3:12)**This cycle includes the call of the first four disciples, five healing stories, five conflict stories, and a summary statement.

**B. The Second Cycle of the First Section (Mark 3:13-6:6)**This cycle includes the appointing of Jesus' twelve disciples, his teaching in parables and miracles, and a summary that recounts Jesus' rejection in his hometown.

**C. The Third Cycle of the First Section (Mark 6:7-8:21)**This cycle includes the sending of the Twelve, John the Baptist's execution during Herod's feast, Jesus' feeding of the five thousand, Jesus' crossings of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus' travels to Tyre and Sidon, Jesus' feeding of the four thousand, and a concluding section.

**III. Mark's Second Section: Jesus Gives Insight into the Suffering, Death, and Resurrection of the Son of Man (Mark 8:22-10:52)**

This section consists of three cycles of stories about Jesus' teaching concerning his impending death and resurrection, and concerning what a life of discipleship entails. The material in this section continues a subtheme of the disciples' inability or failure to see the course of Jesus' messiahship.

**A. Introduction to the Second Section: The Blind Man of Bethsaida Is Given Sight (Mark 8:22-26)**In a two-stage healing, Jesus restores the sight of a blind man. This story, in tandem with the healing of blind Bartimaeus at the end of the second section, indicates that the disciples, like we the readers of the Gospel, are unable to see the hiddenness of Jesus' messiahship established in his death and resurrection.

**B. The First Cycle of the Second Section (Mark 8:27-9:29)**This cycle begins with Jesus' first announcement of his passion and resurrection, Jesus' rebuke of Peter, and Jesus' paradoxical instructions about losing one's life in order to save it. It then describes Jesus' transfiguration, his teaching about Elijah, and his healing of an epileptic boy.

**C. The Second Cycle of the Second Section (Mark 9:30-10:31)**This cycle begins with Jesus' second announcement of his passion and resurrection, the disciples' disputes about which of them is the greatest, and Jesus' paradoxical instructions about the last being first. It then describes Jesus' teaching about exorcism, temptations, salt, marriage and divorce, children, and true riches.

**D. The Third Cycle of the Second Section (Mark 10:32-45)**
This cycle includes Jesus' third announcement of his passion and resurrection, James and John's request to sit on Jesus' right and left, and Jesus' paradoxical instructions about greatness deriving from being like a slave.

**E. Conclusion to the Second Section: Blind Bartimaeus Is Given Sight (Mark 10:46-52)**Jesus heals Bartimaeus from his blindness at the outskirts of Jericho. Bartimaeus responds by following Jesus "on the way."

**IV. Mark's Third Section: Jesus Reveals the Temple as the True and Living Presence of God (Mark 11:1-15:47)**

This section, which includes Mark's Passion Narrative, consists of three cycles of stories that focus first on Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and his teaching in the temple, then on his teaching about the destruction of the temple and the coming of the Son of Man, and finally on his identity as the temple and the crucified Son of God. The material in this section carries through a subtheme of the disciples' inability and failure to watch.

**A. Jesus, the Son of David, Enters Jerusalem and Teaches in the Temple (Mark 11:1-12:44)**Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, enters the temple, curses a fig tree, and engages Jewish leaders who question his authority. In the temple, he tells a parable about a fruit-bearing vineyard; disputes with Pharisees, Herodians, Sadducees, and scribes; and criticizes wealthy leaders who demand honor yet devour widows' houses.

**B. Jesus Teaches about the Temple's Destruction and the Coming of the Son of Man (Mark 13:1-37)**
Jesus speaks about coming persecution, signs of the temple's destruction and the desolating sacrilege, cosmic signs of the end, and the coming of the Son of Man. He says that the Son of Man is near and insists that the day or hour of his return is known only by the Father.

**C. Jesus Is the Temple and Is Crucified and Confessed as the Son of God (Mark 14:1-15:47)**
In Mark's account of the final twenty-four hours of Jesus' life, Jesus is anointed in advance for his burial, he celebrates the Passover meal with his followers, he is arrested, his disciples flee, and Peter denies him three times. Jesus is tried, mocked, crowned, struck, stripped, reviled, crucified, confessed as the Son of God, and laid in a tomb.

**V. A New Beginning (Mark 16:1-8)**

Mark's Gospel concludes with an empty tomb and a promise to the women who discover it that Jesus "is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." But these women do not say anything to anyone, because of their terror and amazement.

AUTHOR: [Paul S. Berge, Emeritus Professor of New Testament](http://www.enterthebible.org/contributors.aspx?rid=911)

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